

Love and the Bird

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Summary: [Complete] Prequel to The Cold Heaven and No Second Troy. It's the 1980s, and Grayson Harman is learning how to navigate the various problems that come with being friends with Alexia Ashford, one of Umbrella's youngest rising stars.

1. Part One

****Resident Evil is owned by Capcom. ****

As usual, this is just a labor of geeky love for a part of the REverse (the Ashford family) that doesn't get a lot of love in the canon.

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><p>Another day, and an entire mansion he had to clean while his father was away. Grayson put on some music—it was a Stevie Wonder cassette, which Alexia had bought him for his birthday—and got to work. He started with the hallways: he vacuumed the rugs, wiped the windows and ledges. Went to the twins' rooms and piled their dirty clothes into a plastic basket, which he dumped down the laundry chute in the hall. Then vacuumed more and dusted. On to the studies, the library, and to Alexander's bedroom, where Grayson cycled the routine. His shoulders were sore, and so was his back, but he still had downstairs to do.<p>

He'd been in the middle of dancing to Do Like You, dusting off a bust of Edward Ashford next to the kitchen door, when someone tapped him on the shoulder. Alexia stood there, laughing. Grayson blushed and took off his headset. "You need something, Alexia?"

Alexia was still laughing. "You're actually not a bad dancer." She wore a gray shirt and pleated black skirt. Her hair was long, the pale blond of dead Hollywood starlets. She wore a hairband of printed

black silk: the design might have been leaves, or tree-branches, or maybe flower garlands. "I thought we could hang out, perhaps," she said. "I'm dreadfully bored, Grayson. I needed a break from the lab."

Stevie Wonder was singing Happy Birthday on his Walkman. Grayson turned it off, stuffing his cleaning rag inside the back pocket of his jeans. He scratched his head awkwardly. Then he said, "I'm kinda working right now, Alexia."

"You forget I'm your employer," Alexia pointed out, and smiled. Where his father served the Ashford family, Grayson had found himself unofficially claimed by Alexia as her personal servant boy. "Your father isn't around to chide you, Grayson," she added encouragingly. "He's off on a business trip with my father." She put her hands on her hips, and sort of puffed out her chest, which, Grayson couldn't help but notice, was beginning to fill out.

He flicked her nose. "Okay, dork," said Grayson, and laughed. "But if dad gives me shit, you're taking the bullet." He hated doing his chores anyway. If Alexia was willing to take the flak, Grayson had no objection to playing hooky.

Alexia frowned and rubbed her nose. "Not funny, Grayson," she said.

Grayson flicked her nose again. She swatted at his hand. "Giving you a hard time is always funny," he said, grinning. Alexia tried to smack him in the chest, but Grayson did a back-slide (he'd seen the dance on Soul Train, on a television in a Rio hotel, and had practiced it because he'd always wanted to do it), and she missed. He stuck his tongue out. And backed right into Alfred.

Alfred was, as usual, unamused. Grayson remembered something his father had said: If you keep frowning like that, your face will freeze that way. That was what had probably happened to Alfred; he'd just kept frowning like that, and his face had frozen that way. "Harman," said Alfred. Alfred, like his sister, looked like the Aryan poster-child for a Hitler Youth camp. He wore an argyle sweatervest and dress slacks. "You were bothering Alexia."

"He wasn't bothering me, Alfred," said Alexia.

"Alexia, why do you insist on playing with the pet?" Alfred shook his head and wrung his hands in his usual nervous way, like he always did whenever he challenged his sister's decisions. Then, to Grayson, "Get back to work, Harman. Since Scott's off with father, the chores are yours to do."

"I gave him the day off. We're going to hang out," said Alexia. Grayson had grown up with the twins, and Alexia was essentially the boss of Alfred, and Alfred never challenged the dynamic, or seemed to want to. On the rare occasions Alfred would try, Alexia was quick to put him back in his place. This was one of those occasions. "You, Alfred, are going to leave," she commanded. "Go back to playing with your tin soldiers."

Alfred seemed to be feeling pretty rebellious today: he shook his head, though kept his eyes on the floorboards. "Grayson isn't your butler, Alexia. He's just a filthy layabout, who's only here because

of Scott."

Grayson was about to say something, but Alexia cut him off. "He's my manservant," she said, folding her arms. Grayson was about to say no, he wasn't her manservant, thanks, but Alexia cut him off again. "And his father isn't the only reason he's here." She didn't elaborate, and took a single step toward Alfred. Despite the fact she was a thin twelve-year-old girl who only stood about five feet, Alexia could sometimes be intimidating, like an overly serious adult in miniature. "Go away, Alfred. We'll talk later."

Alfred didn't argue this time. He muttered something that might have been a fuck you, but in much politer terms, and disappeared upstairs. If Alexia had heard him, she didn't show it. "So," said Grayson, once he was sure Alfred had stopped lurking behind the balustrade. "I really wanna punch your brother."

"Don't touch him, Grayson," warned Alexia, and she was leading him outside, into warm summer sunshine. It was another beautiful day on Rockfort—or would have been if there wasn't a gigantic military prison complex below them. Luckily, the Ashford's home was on the highest point of the island—it was a rocky hill banked by jungle—so the prison compound was as familiar to him as Mongolia, and concerned him just as much.

"So what's the plan?" he asked, ambling beside her, hands deep in his pockets. It was hot, so Grayson rolled the sleeves of his denim jacket to his elbows. "Usually I'm the one bugging you to hang out." He kicked a rock with the toe of his canvas sneaker, watching it sail, then hit the wrought-iron gate with a resounding ding.

"There's a party coming up," said Alexia, walking beside him. "Lord Spencer is throwing it in his Arklay mansion. Some sort of mixer for Umbrella staff." She'd pushed the sleeves of her shirt up, and a few pinheads of sweat glistened on her pale forehead.

"Do we have to go hang out with a bunch of old guys in white coats?" he said, and sighed.

"Father is attending in the hope of capturing Lord Spencer's attention," said Alexia. "He's using me as the means to open that dialog."

"What do you mean?"

"Twelve-year-old genius," she said, as if it should have been obvious. "It will be my debut to my colleagues. Several of them have expressed interest in meeting me. One scientist in particular, a William Birkin, already hates me." Alexia grinned with white teeth. "Should prove to be an interesting party."

"Yeah, you mentioned him once, I think." When they reached the shade of the jungle at the bottom of the hill, he was relieved. Though, he supposed, it wasn't much of a jungle: most of it had been manicured by professional landscapers, so there were clear paths to walk on, lampposts for nighttime, and benches. A team of gardeners regularly tended the canna lilies and other flowers here, and some were out right now, dressed in dirty coveralls, planting new plants, or moving dirt and mulch in wheelbarrows, their sun-browned flesh glistening

with sweat.

"Well, he's not important anyway. I didn't drag you out here to talk about Birkin," said Alexia. She stopped in the middle of the path and looked at him. "I want you to come with us, Grayson."

"Asking me on a date, Alexia?"

Alexia turned pink. "No, not at all. As friends, Grayson."

Grayson was a little disappointed, but managed to smoothly play it off. "Okay. Sure. I'll go." Since he'd been seven, or maybe eight, when he'd first learned what a crush was from his father, he'd been crushing on Alexia, but had never had the guts to tell her. "When's the big party?"

A parrot watched them from the branches of a banyan tree, then started to preen. "Next week. We're flying out to Raccoon City, and we'll be taking a car from there." Alexia walked, the dirt and pebbles crunching under her loafers. "It won't be the last either, I feel."

"What makes you say that?" asked Grayson. "From what dad's said about Lord Spencer, and what your dad's said, the guy's a super paranoid. Doesn't sound like the party-hardy kind of guy, you know?"

"It's a way for Umbrella staff to convene, fish for secrets or trade data," said Alexia, and Grayson heard, faintly, uncertainty in her tone. "All in one place, where said super paranoid can see and hear everything."

"You okay, Alexia? Sounding a little weird there."

"Just worried," she admitted, and looked at him. "I'm only twelve, Grayson. I realize that, despite my intelligence, I lack certain nuanced skills—and experience. Umbrella is a pit of black mambas, and I'm just a girl."

"Living in a lonely world? Taking the midnight train going anywhere?" He grinned, proud of his own joke.

Alexia was trying not to laugh, but failed, and started giggling.

"See? I knew you had a sense of humor," he said, giving her a friendly shove. Grayson faced her, back-jogging down the trail. "You'll be fine, Alexia. You're pretty much an adult in miniature anyway, so things should be cool for you."

"Just be sure you pack some warm clothes," said Alexia. "It's going to be chilly."

The week passed. They flew into Raccoon City on Alexander's private jet. Alexander, who'd returned from his trip to London with Grayson's father, was the first to disembark, followed by Grayson's father. Winter in Rockfort was warm given its proximity to Brazil, but here in this part of the American Midwest, it was bitterly cold. In the rented black Mercedes, the radio-host said they were in the middle of a cold-snap, and things were expected to hover just barely above zero for the week.

"I always hated Midwestern winters, Scott," said Alexander conversationally. He was sitting in the passenger seat, as usual, while Grayson's father drove. Like his father, Alexander wore a burberry coat, a thick scarf, and a silk trilby hat. His red beard was meticulously groomed like his hair, which, under the hat, was slicked back with pomade, a hairstyle from a gone Hollywood. "What do you think, Grayson? Dreadful weather, isn't it?"

Grayson hadn't immediately realized Alexander had spoken to him. He was watching the snow wheeling beyond the window in thick gray clouds.

Alexia elbowed him. She was bundled up in a peacoat and red scarf, and looked annoyed. "Father's talking to you, Grayson." Alfred sat beside her, and was watching him, frowning disapprovingly.

"Oh," said Grayson, snapping back into the present. His father's gray eyes were caged in the mirror, scowling at him. His eyes said: __You'd better watch yourself, kiddo__. Grayson gave Alexander a profoundly apologetic look, if only to soften the inevitable lecture his dad would give him later. "I'm sorry, sir. It'd be nicer if it wasn't so cold, I think. I haven't seen snow since I'd visited my aunt in New Jersey."

"The one with the blood clot, yes? In Atlantic City," said Alfred, and Grayson knew he'd meant it as a pot-shot.

"Alfred, mind your bloody manners," said Alexander, giving Alfred a stern dad-look. Then, to Grayson, "I apologize. My son isn't very tactful, it seems. That said, it's quite all right, Grayson. It's a boring ride." He clapped his father's large square shoulder. "If Scott wasn't here, I'd probably zone out, too."

Grayson's father smiled approvingly in the mirror, merging the car with interstate traffic. The road was mostly covered in slush. Cars crawled in the lanes, trying not to skid into each other, while the emergency crews threw more salt down on the asphalt. "You know me, sir," said his father. "Always glad to be of service."

They drove for an hour on the highway, then drove two more hours on several backroads, through towns with names like Clear Lake, which became tinier towns with ten-syllable (by his count anyway, when Grayson had attempted to pronounce them) Native American names. The Spencer estate was on the end of a long dirt road which, in the current weather, was snowed over, and barely a hiking trail. The car shook as his father drove, the snow grumbling under the tires, low-hanging branches scratching the windows. Eventually, the shaking and scratching stopped, and they were driving up an asphalt driveway carpeted in a thin layer of rock salt.

The Spencer estate was enormous. It was built in a sort of Victorian Gothic style that, Grayson thought, would have been right at home in one of Edgar Allan Poe's stories. It was very old looking: all spires, pillars and arched windows, and carpeted in ivy. They parked in front, and a young kid, probably hired locally, took their car away, and around the back of the mansion. A few other cars had pulled up behind them too, and were similarly taken away.

Lines of old men and women filed into the the mansion, dressed in

long coats, scarves, and hats. Grayson figured most of the people here couldn't have been younger than fifty. Though he noticed a young gangling kid, maybe nineteen or twenty, with a smattering of cystic acne on his chin, and he was walking with another guy who couldn't have been much older than him, and wore sunglasses. They went inside the mansion.

"Any idea who those guys are?" asked Grayson, walking beside Alexia. "Kinda stand out." He gestured at all the blue-hairs.

Warmth hit them when they stepped into the mansion. A geriatric butler in an old-fashioned tailcoat took their coats, scarves, and hats, and went away. "I think that was William Birkin and Albert Wesker," said Alexia. Underneath the peacoat, she wore a black sweater over a white eyelet dress which, Grayson decided, made her look like a porcelain doll, or, on his empty stomach, a cupcake. "Until I'd been hired by Umbrella, Birkin had been the youngest researcher in the company. I only know who Wesker is because everyone says he wears sunglasses all the time, and works with Birkin under James Marcus, one of my grandfather's close friends."

Muted conversation filled the foyer, intermittently broken by the occasional awkward laugh. Alexander was shaking hands with a few of the researchers, smiling. He wore a pale gray suit, and a black silk tie. His father wore a black suit, and stood beside Alexander while he talked to his peers, and seemed to have caught the eye of a few of the female researchers (two of them, Grayson was surprised to see, didn't look much older than thirty), who were smiling and giggling, and saying how nice he looked. His father, Grayson had often heard women say, was handsome, like a silver-screen movie star. And then they'd just rattle names off: __Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Errol Flynn, George Brent__...

His father politely excused himself from Alexander, and his small flock of admirers, and approached Grayson. He had that look: __I'm going to lay down the business__. "Grayson," he said. Alfred followed his father like a lost puppy, who had, it seemed, always liked his father more than Alexander, and might have even looked up to him. "I don't want you causing a scene tonight, kiddo." He pointed at him: __I'm serious__. "No funny business. You stay on your best behavior. Remember, you represent the Ashfords. And I'll whoop your ass if you make them look bad. Got it?"

Alexia tried not to laugh, and managed not to. But there was a shit-eating grin on her face. "Scout's honor, dad," said Grayson, and saluted, working his best I'll-be-good-really-I-will smile. "I'll be the nicest kid."

"Yeah, I'm sure you will," said his father, completely unconvinced, though clearly hoping for the best. "Remember, kiddo: you mess up, I'll whoop your ass until it's black and blue, and you can't sit for a week." He fixed Grayson's tie. "You look nice in that suit, son." Then, to Alexia, "Don't you think so, doll? Cleans up real nice, this one, doesn't he?"

Alexia nodded. His father was the only person she let call her names like doll, or sweetheart, or baby. Like Alfred, Alexia liked his dad a lot, and seemed to appreciate his weird blue-collar charm. "He does, Scott," she agreed, dusting an invisible piece of lint from Grayson's lapel. "Like a proper gentleman. It's a lovely change from

those ugly denim jackets."

Scott laughed. He took something out from his pocket and handed it to Grayson: it was a small black plastic comb wrapped in plastic. "Comb your damn hair, son," he said, then turned to Alfred and patted him on the head with an enormous paw. "Come on, Al. Let's go find something to eat. Alexia, you make sure Grayson combs his damn hair."

Alfred scowled at Grayson, but visibly brightened at his father's suggestion. "I am rather hungry, Scott," he agreed, and trotted after his father, who loomed like a pale giant over the crowd, and was gone.

"You heard Scott. Comb your hair," said Alexia, and pushed him in a friendly way, still shit-grinning.

"My hair looks fine, dork," he said, and play-shoved her back.

"It looks like a mop, Grayson."

"I'll die before I do a dorky comb-over like Alfred."

An old woman was watching them carouse. Grayson didn't care, but Alexia blushed deeply, probably remembering she was among peers, and not in the privacy of her family's mansion. Alexia straightened, composing her features in a look of polite indifference. She went to the old woman and extended a slim white hand, "Alexia Ashford. I'm currently overseeing the Rockfort Labs."

The old woman looked a bit stunned, and shook Alexia's hand. "I wasn't aware you were so young," said the woman, in an accent that might have been Swedish. "Adna Nilsson, Stockholm labs. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Ashford."

"Are you working on the T-strains as well, or attending one of the other projects?" asked Alexia. "I'd heard something about a Project Nemesis, though I'm admittedly scarce on details."

Adna chuckled in the sort of politely condescending way only a woman her age could manage. An old man in brown tweed, perhaps Adna's husband, said something to her in Swedish, and they went away.

"What a bitch," said Grayson aloud, pushing his hands in his pockets. He rocked back on the heels of his oxfords, watching the older couple talking to Birkin, and his friend in sunglasses.

Alexia frowned. Then she said, "Most adults don't take children very seriously."

"Who cares about them, Alexia?" said Grayson, grabbing her wrist and leading her away, threading through the party-goers. "Let's go explore the mansion." A string quartet had set up in the corner of the foyer, and were, Alexia informed him, playing Paganini. Alexia wanted to watch, but Grayson said no, he didn't care about Paganini, and pushed her up the stairs.

The staircase led to a broad landing, then divided into two smaller staircases, which went right and left, and up to the balustrade. The balustrade was built sort of like a bridge, and spanned the length of

the foyer, then wrapped around it. As they walked, Alexia stopped to introduce herself and shake hands with her colleagues, who gave her patronizing hellos, or peppered her with questions to either, Grayson decided, see if she knew her stuff, or to catch her in some kind of straw man. Alexia, however, navigated the conversations with ease, and always left her co-workers looking slack-jawed and intellectually gutted.

They left the foyer, and were above the dining room. There was a long white-clothed table below laden with food, the silverware glittering in the chandelier-light. Grayson saw his father and Alfred piling crab cakes and lobster tails on their plates, and they were talking to Alexander, who was drinking wine and munching on a croquette. Grayson realized how hungry he was. One of the caterers walked by, carrying a tray of stuffed clams; he took two and scarfed them down, then dragged Alexia through a nearby door.

A hallway. A few researchers had broken away from the party and lingered here, talking quietly in small groups. They passed a bedroom, and heard some stuff going on, which Grayson knew was two people going at it, and trying to do it as quietly as possible. Alexia seemed to understand too, and turned pink.

"Man," said Grayson, and laughed. He thumped on the door with the flat side of his fist. "Hey, guys. There's kids out here." And he laughed again when the noises stopped, and the people—"it sounded like two guys"—on the other side started arguing, very quietly to each other, about whether or not they were being too loud.

"Grayson," said Alexia, and slapped his arm. She was bright red. "___Stop ___it."

Grayson grinned. "Stop what? I'm being good."

A few of the researchers who'd gathered in the hall were looking at them. Alexia composed herself, then circuited the groups, shaking hands and chatting about virions and chemicals, and other shit Grayson didn't understand, and making polite inquiries about their work, and how long they'd been with Umbrella. When she'd finished, Alexia returned to him, and they walked down another set of stairs, eventually finding themselves on the ground-floor again, in a part of the mansion that was pretty much deserted.

He peeked in a few of the rooms: bedrooms which hadn't been re-decorated, or aired out, it seemed, since the 1930s; an office with a medicine cabinet, which was also part bedroom, and might have been used by a personal physician at some point; a study which, after Grayson rifled through a few desk-drawers and found a journal, had belonged to one of Spencer's employees, a researcher who'd worked with dogs. Apparently, the mansion wasn't Spencer's actual home; other people lived here, mostly researchers, for the Arklay Laboratory. Alexia had mentioned Arklay to him once, and how she'd wanted to do an internship there, but Umbrella had said no, and appointed her to the Rockfort Labs instead. He'd never actually visited the Rockfort Labs; it was in the prison compound, he knew, or close to it, but his father had always told him to stay away from there.

"You really shouldn't read other people's journals, Grayson," said

Alexia, plucking the book from his hands and laying it on the desk, where a brass lamp with a green glass shade flooded the room in dim, creamy light.

"There's a lot of things I shouldn't do, but I do anyway," he said, reaching into his pocket and coming up with a crumpled pack of Dunhills he'd taken from his father. He lit one with a tear-away match, then stuffed the pack into his pocket.

Alexia frowned like a very disappointed mother. "You smoke, Grayson?"

"Sometimes," he said, and blew smoke, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Want one?"

"No. It's a filthy habit, and does horrible things to your lungs."

He shrugged, blowing another cloud of smoke.

When he'd finished his cigarette, he opened a window in the hallway, letting the cold air hit him. Sure he'd gotten most of the smoke-smell off his clothes ("Alexia," he said, "can you smell the cig? Here, sniff my shirt." And she'd told him no, she couldn't, and that they'd better go before someone found them) they headed back upstairs. But when they got up on the second floor, it was dead silent. The researchers who'd been loitering in the hall had gone away; though, dimly through the walls, Grayson could still hear the party, and the Paganini strings.

They passed the bedroom they'd heard the two guys in earlier. Something was shuffling, very slowly, on the other side of the door, and Grayson wondered if maybe the guy was drunk, or had maybe gotten hurt. He checked the knob; it was locked. Then someone came up behind him, looming.

"Children shouldn't be wandering around the mansion." It was the butler in the tailcoat, who'd taken their stuff at the door. Up close, Grayson could see the deep wrinkles, and the dark age-spots on his long, oblong face. The corners of his mouth were wet with saliva, as old people mouths tended to be. "You should hurry back to your parents."

"I think the guy in there might be hurt," said Grayson, looking at the door.

"Yes, he doesn't seem to be walking correctly," agreed Alexia.

The butler cocked a bushy white eyebrow. He was impossibly tall and thin, and seemed to stoop when he walked. "I'll see to it," said the butler. "Children, please, return to your parents." Then he was gone through the door, and shut it behind him.

Grayson wanted to see what was up, and peered through the keyhole, and so did Alexia. The butler's back was turned to them. He moved to the side. There was a naked man in there, though he looked wrong: his eyes were blank, white things, and his mouth was smeared with blood. Grayson scrambled away from the door. He heard the pop of a silenced gunshot.

Alexia was still looking in the keyhole. "The butler just shot him in the head," she said, stepping back. But she didn't seem surprised, or even scared. "Come on, Grayson. This isn't our business."

"Alexia, the butler just murdered a guy. I mean, sure, the guy was weird-looking, but maybe he was just sick?" Grayson kept his voice low, so the butler couldn't hear. "We need to tell someone," he added, through his teeth.

"I could explain things to you, but you wouldn't believe me anyway," said Alexia, and they were back in the party. Things continued on as if a guy hadn't just been shot; people were laughing, talking, eating and drinking.

"Alexia, a guy was __killed__."

"He wasn't a man anymore," said Alexia, without elaboration.

2. Part One - End

Before Grayson could ask what she'd meant, the kid with cystic acne, Birkin, was walking up to them, the man in sunglasses, Wesker, flanking his right. "You're Alexia Ashford?" asked Birkin. Grayson could see all the angry pustules and acne-scars on his face, and it made him cringe. "You don't look like much."

Alexia seemed unfazed, and probably was. "Have you ever thought about seeing a dermatologist, Dr. Birkin?" she asked, perfectly innocent.

The man named Wesker smirked a little, but said nothing. Birkin scowled. "I bet you think you're real hot shit, don't you, Ashford?" He pushed Alexia into Grayson, who caught her by the shoulders. "Well, you're nothing. You're just a little girl who got to where she is because of daddy."

"Birkin," said Wesker, in a deep purr that made Grayson think of lions. "Don't let your bad temper get the better of you." He shook his head. "She's the granddaughter of Edward Ashford. And Lord Spencer, as I understand it, has a bit of a soft-spot for the girl."

"What kinda asshole pushes around a twelve-year-old girl anyway?" said Grayson. "Grow up, dickhole."

"Nobody was talking to you, idiot," said Birkin, shooting Grayson a sharp look. Then, to Alexia, "Oh, right. Edward Ashford." Birkin bobbed his head a bit, shaggy blonde hair hanging in his eyes. "How's it feel knowing your family's only notable achievement was Eddie being the first white guy to die from the progenitor virus?" He grinned knowingly.

"You take both of those things back," said Alexia, and shoved Birkin. "At least I don't need to showboat like this to fulfill some niggling insecurity, Birkin."

"Don't touch me, Ashford," he said, and pushed her back.

Then they were both fighting on the balcony. Alexia smacked Birkin

several times in the chest, and started windmilling her legs and arms when Grayson got her around the waist and pulled her off of Birkin, as if she was an angry cat, and away from him. Birkin hadn't really hit Alexia; he'd just pushed her a few times. She was okay, but she was seething.

Alexander, Alfred, and his father quickly came to see what the commotion was. Alfred made a bee-line for Alexia and started asking if she was okay, if she wanted something to drink, or needed a bit of fresh air. Birkin had a few very minor scratches on his cheeks and neck, where Alexia had gotten him with her nails. Alexander looked completely mortified, and his father was looking at Grayson as if the entire thing had been his fault.

"What is going on here?" said an old man's voice. He was thin and gangling, and limped, slightly bent to the side, with a rosewood cane. His skin was the color, and almost exact texture, of yellowing parchment. There were dark age-spots on his face, and a thousand deep wrinkles webbing his face like the rivers and elevation lines on a map. He wore a herringbone suit, and sported a gray handlebar mustache and pomaded hair. A strong metallic tang of cologne wafted from his clothes.

"Lord Spencer," said Alexander, and stepped aside, allowing the old man past.

Grayson let go of Alexia, who'd calmed down, but looked horribly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Lord Spencer," she said, studying the floorboards, blood pooling in her cheeks. "I didn't mean toâ€"

Spencer wasn't looking at Alexia, however. He was looking at Birkin. His eyes were a watery blue, and nested in deep pockets of wrinkled parchment-flesh. "You started this, Dr. Birkin," he said, and Grayson wondered how he'd known that. Then he remembered something Alexia had said on Rockfort: _All in one place, where said super paranoiac can see and hear everything._

Birkin didn't argue the point. "Yes, sir," was all he said, trying his best, and failing, to look repentant.

"Go, get yourself a drink at the bar," said Spencer, ushering Birkin away with his cane. He looked at Wesker. "Albert, I expect you to keep a tighter hold on young William's leash. I'll be informing Dr. Marcus of this."

"Of course, sir," said Wesker, and he left.

"And you, young Lady," said Spencer, turning to Alexia. "I expected better from you."

"I'm sorry, Lord Spencer," said Alexia, and sucked at her bottom lip, wringing her hands. "It won't happen again," she added.

"I trust it won't, my dear." Spencer patted her head with an arthritic hand. His large ruby ring glittered like a fat bead of blood in the chandelier-light. Then he said, "Do enjoy the party, my dear," and limped away. Before Spencer had gone, he'd smiled at Grayson with old teeth, as if he'd known a secret.

Did he know about the dead guy? Grayson thought. He shook his head, then said to Alexia, "You okay?"

Alfred was in the middle of fixing her sweater. She gently pushed her brother away, and nodded. "I'm fine," she said, though Grayson could see she was anything but fine. Their friendship had become almost telepathic; what she felt, he felt on some weird level. "I'm going to go walk."

"I'll come with you, Alexia," said Alfred, and started to trot after her. She'd told him no, she didn't want him to come, and left without him. He turned to Grayson and scowled. "This is all your fault, Harman," he said, frowning deeply. "I bet you did something. You've always been a troublemaker."

"I didn't do shit. Birkin started with Alexia. You heard Spencer say so," said Grayson, and for once, he was serious. He hadn't done anything. Then, "Hey, Alfred? If you saw someone die, would you tell someone?"

Alfred looked confused. "What?" he said. "Well, I mean. Yes. Yes, I would. Why wouldn't I? Murder is against the law." He squinted at Grayson, and leaned toward him. Conspiratorially, Alfred asked, "Did you kill someone, Harman?"

"No, it was just a hypothetical question," he lied. "You know, in case I killed Birkin," he added, and grinned.

"Well, in that case, I'd probably look the other way," said Alfred, in a rare display of amiability.

Grayson's father came over. "Alfred, mind letting me talk to my son?" he asked. Alfred nodded and scampered away. His father fixed Grayson with a look. "So Spencer says you didn't do anything. That true, kiddo?"

"I didn't do anything, dad. Shiâ€"crap, I mean. Crap."

"Watch your mouth," his father warned. Then he said, "So what happened?"

A guy was killed in the room by the butler, after he'd finished fucking some guy. "Birkin came over and started taking pot-shots," said Grayson, and shrugged. "Alexia initially played him off. That big guy with the glasses, Wesker, tried to get Birkin to lay off. Birkin didn't. Whipped out the Edward Ashford thing, and Alexia went ballistic."

"Not the Ashford's proudest achievement," agreed his father, bobbing his head a bit. "Anything else?"

It was the butler, in the bedroom, with a silencer. _"Nope," said Grayson, and shook his head. "That was it."

Alexander came over, and Grayson told him what had happened. He knitted his eyebrows, nodding. When he'd mentioned Edward, Alexander's expression collapsed. "So Birkin was taking cheap shots at my daughter," he said, and sighed. "What do you think I should do, Scott?"

Grayson's father shrugged. "Want my opinion, sir?" he said. "Birkin isn't worth it. They're kids. Kids are going to fight. Nobody got hurt, and that's all that matters."

Tell that to the dead guy in the bedroom, Grayson thought.

"Birkin is twenty, Scott."

"Okay, so he's a really big kid, Sir," he said. "I'm telling you: let it go."

Grayson decided that he needed to see the body for himself, to make sure someone had really been murdered before involving cops and getting the mansion SWAT-teamed. After all, murder was a pretty serious thing, and wasn't treated lightly. "Excuse me, dad. Sir," he said, and left. _Maybe Alexia had just been fucking with me._

When he reached the hallway, it was still empty. The door was unlocked. Grayson took a deep breath and pushed the door open, mentally preparing himself.

Nothing.

There was no corpse, no scary butler with a silencer. Quietly, Grayson closed the door behind him and turned the lights on. The place was immaculate, as if nothing had actually happened in the room, and hadn't for a long time. He checked the floor for any blood-spatter, and found nothing.

The door opened behind him, and he felt his heart jump into his throat. Was it the butler? Without thinking, Grayson dove and crawled belly-down under the bed, waiting. He saw loafers, though they were too small to belong to a man. He waited until the person was close enough—and grabbed them by the ankle.

A girl shrieked. When Grayson got out from under the bed, Alexia was on the floor, and looked as if she was on the brink of a heart-attack. "Had a feeling it was you," he said, and started laughing until he couldn't breathe. "You s-should see your f-face—"pfff."

"Grayson, you rotten _jerk_," she snapped, and whacked him in the chest.

"Did you piss yourself?" he asked, still laughing, hot tears blurring the edges of his vision.

"No, I didn't. But—"ugh—"_you're such a jerk_, Grayson."

Grayson settled down and wiped his eyes, his sides still hurting. Then he said, "There's no body."

"I figured there wouldn't be," said Alexia, once she'd composed herself. "Umbrella always has a clean-up detail on-hand."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"You know all those zombie films you've made me watch, Grayson?"

He didn't actually believe her. "You're telling me the naked guy was

a zombie."

Alexia looked completely serious. "It's an unfortunate by-product of T-strain testing," she explained, hands on her hips. "The researcher had likely been infected from the labs, and hadn't shown any obvious signs; usually, the condition initially manifests as cold symptoms." Alexia shook her head. Then, "What a fool. He could have put the rest of us at risk. Luckily, Umbrella has contingencies in place."

"So if I do take you seriously, for just a moment, you're telling me the butler was Umbrella's janitor?"

"They're everywhere, the clean-up crew. You just can't tell them apart from the crowd." Alexia sighed, staring at the antique Persian throw-rug. "I was hoping to get a sample to compare to the strains in the Rockfort labs. Umbrella hasn't sent me anything new; I think they're planning to move me."

"Where would they move you?" he asked.

She shrugged. "If I were to guess? The Antarctic base."

"So what does that mean?" he asked, and frowned. "You gonna leave us? I mean, if you get this job."

Alexia shook her head. "Of course not. I'd want you and Scott to come. Father and Alfred would likely come, too."

That made him feel better. Grayson glanced at the door. "We should go, before that freaky butler comes back," he said, opening it. Alexia walked past him, into the hall, and he followed. Winter-dead branches scratched at the windows, casting shadows that looked like claws, and those claws were reaching for him... He shook his head. _No_, he thought, _don't psyche yourself out_. _It's just an old house_.

"Everything all right, Grayson?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay," he lied. "Is the party almost over?"

The walls expanded from the cold air, groaning and creaking in the dark, and made other old house noises. Alexia checked her watch: it was an antique Rolex, on a pale leather strap. "A quarter to midnight, so I imagine so," she said.

"We're not actually staying here, right?" he said.

"Afraid of old houses, Grayson?" Alexia flashed white teeth.

"Just this one," he admitted.

Alexia giggled. Then started walking back, toward the sounds of people talking.

3. Part Two

It was 1983. A few months had passed since the party at the Spencer estate, and Grayson still dreamed of the dead man through the keyhole... And the way Spencer had smiled at him, like he'd known

something.

They'd celebrated the twin's thirteenth birthday in January, and then Grayson's fifteenth, two days after.

Puberty had hit Alexia with nuclear force: she'd gone from a weedy twelve-year-old girl to a tall, fairly developed thirteen-year-old who looked, more or less, like a woman in miniature. Alfred, however, hadn't changed too drastically; he'd gotten taller, and a little more awkward, and was almost always moody.

Right after Grayson's birthday, Alexia had received a call from Umbrella. She told him she'd gotten the Antarctica promotion, and they'd gone away for a week to tour the facility. They'd landed at the remote structure several miles inland from the northern Antarctic coast, over dramatic glaciers and frozen lakes. The ride there was always more interesting than the actual base, Grayson found. The base was a network of ferroconcrete tunnels, full of people in lab-coats, and automatic doors with HAZARD or LABORATORY stenciled on them in blocky yellow letters. Collegiate researchers had gawked and pointed at Alexia, and some had even been eager to shake her hand, and say how much they'd admired her.

Then they came back to Rockfort in early February for two weeks, so Alexia could prepare, and close up any projects she might have been doing on Rockfort, or re-assigning them to the research team there. Grayson didn't really know the details. She'd go away for most of the day, then come back at dusk, tired and hungry, complaining there was so much needing to be done, and that all she really wanted was a nap, was that so much to ask? And every time, Grayson had told her no, that wasn't too much to ask, and he'd put on her Anita O'Day records, and kept her company while she'd packed her things.

It was another one of those nights. It was raining outside, and Alexia was packing up her research in the laboratory Alexander had built for her in the mansion's west wing. "So we're definitely going with you?" he asked, watching her organize print-outs into folders, leaning back against the door.

"Yes, Grayson. I told you before: you and Scott are coming," said Alexia, stacking the files and neatly packing them into a shallow cardboard box. "Scott is our butler, and you're my butler. We're not bloody going anywhere without our butlers."

"I'm technically not anyone's butler," he pointed out. "I'm like... a butler-in-training."

Alexia shot him a sharp look. "You're my butler," she repeated, and there was a finality in her voice that told him there was no point arguing that. "One day, Scott will die. That's how life goes: people die, and other people take their place. And you're going to take his place, Grayson."

"I know," he said, and pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

She packed up the last of her files, then set the box aside, atop a small pile of other boxes. "Grayson, has Alfred been acting a little strange?" she asked, and crouched, labeling the boxes with a felt-tip pen. "Stranger than usual, I mean."

"He's been kinda moody," he said. "More than usual."

"Almost as if something is bothering him," said Alexia, and nodded. She finished labeling the boxes, then stood.

"Hey, Alexia?"

"Yes, Grayson?"

"That guy who died in Spencer's mansion. He wasn't really a zombie."

"Zombie wouldn't be the proper term," she said, and shook her head.

"There's no such things as zombies, Alexia. That guy was murdered. And we didn't do anything."

Alexia rolled her eyes. "Nobody was murdered, Grayson. He was already dead when the shot was taken." She nudged him out of the way, so she could get through the door. "Forget about what happened at Spencer's estate. I've been meaning to talk to you. Let's go for a walk."

They walked outside. It was raining still, but it was warm and pleasant. The smell of canna lilies, gardenias, and sea-salt wafted in the air. They strolled through his father's garden, among the flower-beds, and the marble sculptures of Greek gods. "So what's going on?" he asked, and sat on the lip of the Athena fountain.

Alexia sat beside him. "Father is hosting an event here," she said, and sighed. "He's invited some of the senior researchers from the Antarctic facility, as well as researchers from Arklay and Paris." She looked at him. Her eyes were the pale blue color of frost. "Birkin will be there," she added.

"Did the shit Birkin say really bother you that much?"

"Oh, no. I'm looking forward to seeing him. I can gloat," she said, and grinned. Then shook her head. "I'm not really worried about anything, to be honest. But I do want you to be there."

"So you dragged me out here just to say that?" Grayson laughed. "Not like I have a choice to not go. I'm kinda stuck on this island with you guys." He playfully nudged her in the side with his elbow, then said, "You make it sound like you're going away."

Alexia didn't say anything. Instead, she awkwardly touched his hand and turned pink. Grayson's ears burned. And just as awkwardly, he laced his fingers with her's. He'd never held a girl's hand before. It was weird, Grayson thought, and uncomfortable in the newness of it all. Where was he supposed to go from there? Should he try to kiss her, like in the movies? He stared at her, trying to imagine what that kiss might look like: there was rain, and, somewhere from the back of his mind, Stevie Wonder was singing That Girl. Grayson leaned toward her.

She didn't move. She tensed up and froze, like a small animal pinned in the headlights. But she didn't move away, or tell him to

stop.

"Alexia, what are you doing?" Grayson shot up, releasing Alexia's hand. Alfred was standing under an umbrella, and he looked pissed off. He marched toward them and pushed Grayson so hard he tumbled back into the fountain. "Don't you dare touch my sister, Harman."

Grayson sat up, his clothes soaked. "I didn't do shit," he said, and jumped to his feet, shoving Alfred back, who fell flat on his ass. "I'll take that umbrella and shove it so far up your ass, Alfred. I fucking swear."

"You were trying to soil Alexia's innocence," said Alfred, and he lunged, dropping the umbrella and tackling Grayson to the ground. Grayson punched Alfred in the nose, and Alfred yelped, then punched him square in the jaw.

"Would you both stop it?" said Alexia, and Grayson barely heard her over the sound of their breathing, and their fists connecting.

Grayson rolled and got Alfred under him, then started beating him in the chest, stomach, and shoulders. He was trying to avoid Alfred's face, convinced that, if he avoided it, he'd get into less trouble. Alfred's nose was bleeding, and so was his mouth (he'd bitten his lip; Grayson hadn't punched him in the mouth). He swung hard, and caught Grayson under the eye with his fist. Stars popped in his vision, then Grayson felt pain.

Alfred got him on the recoil and started beating on him. Grayson twisted and took a blow to his shoulder, swayed back, then kicked Alfred's legs out from under him. Alfred folded. Grayson started beating him on the head with his fists, then got him in a head-lock, squeezing the air from his throat.

"Grayson, you're going to kill him!" he heard Alexia say, and she was pulling at his denim jacket, trying to get him off. Then she started hitting him in the back, between the shoulders. "Get off of my brother, Grayson!"

Grayson let go and stood up. His knuckles were sore and split in some places, and ached deeply. Alfred was gasping and wiping blood on his shirt-sleeve. "When father hears of this," said Alfred, "you're going to pay, Harman." When he'd mentioned Alexander, Grayson noticed a darkness in Alfred's eyes that had never been there before.

"Alfred, there's no need to go to father," said Alexia, helping him up. She took a handkerchief from the breast pocket of her shirt and offered it to Alfred, who took it gratefully and started wiping his mouth and nose. "It was my fault. I'd initiated things with Grayson. Not him, Alfred."

Alfred looked stunned, as if Alexia had struck him in the mouth. He stared at her for a long time. Then he said, "I see." He almost sounded disappointed, maybe even sad, and a little angry. Alfred left without taking his umbrella, clutching the bloody handkerchief.

"I'm dead," said Grayson, running his fingers back through his hair. His father was going to murder him.

"Your father won't be happy," agreed Alexia, as if she'd read his thoughts. Then she turned and slapped him hard across the face. "What you did to my brother was entirely uncalled for, Grayson."

"He pushed me!"

"You could have just pushed him back, and been done with it," said Alexia, raising her voice a little. Her blue eyes turned to ice. "But no, you started beating on him, Grayson! Thrashing him like a proper savage."

"Like how you'd smacked the shit out of Birkin?" said Grayson, and immediately regretted it when Alexia's expression became a storm. "I'm sorry," he said, and meant it, shaking his head. "That was uncalled for."

"You're bloody right that was uncalled for!" she shouted, scowling at him. "It was a poor choice on my part, and one that cost me a reputation with the Arklay Labs." She leaned toward him, somehow threatening in the way she'd done it despite being shorter than him, like a mean chihuahua. "I shouldn't have fed into Birkin's bullshit. It was a moment of weakness. Which I'd kindly ask you not to throw in my face, Grayson, in an attempt to deflect the discussion."

"This isn't a discussion. You're bitching me out," said Grayson, leaning away from her.

"You know what I mean," she hissed, and pushed him, just enough to make him stumble. "And of course I'm bitching you out! You nearly killed my brother."

"I said I was sorry, Alexia."

She seemed to deflate. Alexia sighed and shook her head. "Well, you didn't kill him," she said, looking to the side. She was watching a small green frog, or maybe it was a toad, hopping across the flagstone.

"So are we cool?" he asked.

"No. I'm still pissed off at you."

When they returned to the mansion, his father was waiting for him, Alfred shivering beside him, putting on his best victim act. His father had taken Grayson upstairs into their room and locked the door behind them. Then he'd gotten out the belt (it was one of those thick leather ones too, with the large buckles, and Grayson suspected he'd only bought it for the sole purpose of whooping his ass), said Grayson wasn't too old to learn a lesson, and had beaten his ass and the back of his legs with that belt until it hurt to move.

"I told you to leave Alfred alone," his father had said, putting the belt away as Grayson limped toward the door, his ass and legs burning. "Consider this getting off easy, because when you're eighteen, kiddo, and still want to act like a thug, it'll be my fists."

Alfred was waiting for Grayson in the hallway, freshly showered, a shit-eating grin on his face. His hands were pushed deep in the

pockets of a gray bed robe. "Looking a little sore there, Harman," said Alfred.

"Shut the fuck up, Alfred," said Grayson, limping past him.

"You know Alexia doesn't actually like you," said Alfred.

Grayson knew what Alfred was trying to do: he was attempting to goad him into another fight. So he ignored him and headed to the library, where he'd left his homework packet. Since Rockfort was so remote, Alexia tutored Grayson and printed these packets for him. They were factoring polynomials, and he'd pushed the work off because he hated math. But Alexia had been bothering him about the assignment, and since he couldn't sleep anyway, he figured he'd be productive. Besides, Grayson saw it as an apology, in some weird way.

Before he'd gone, he detoured to the bathroom and showered, then changed into baggy sweat pants and a T-shirt. In the library, Grayson sat, very gingerly, at the desk by the bay window that overlooked the sea. He yanked the little chain on the desk-lamp and turned the light on, taking the packet from the drawer, along with his Under the Blade cassette, and popped it into the desktop player.

He took out a pencil and sharpened it, taking a moment to review the notes Alexia had printed for him which, in painstaking detail, showed each step to solving the equation, and still managed to confuse him.

A hand pointed at something on his assignment. "You have to find the greatest common factor first, Grayson," explained Alexia, and she took his pencil, drawing a little tree with numbers in the margins of the paper. "See? Both numbers have five in common."

"Oh," he said, feeling stupid.

Alexia patted his head. She walked him through the rest of the problem. "It's not as hard as it looks," she assured him. She turned the volume down on his cassette player. "It also doesn't help to listen to this noise while you're trying to do homework."

"Twisted Sister is great," said Grayson.

"Well, we're all entitled to our opinions," said Alexia, and smiled. She pulled up a chair beside him, and sat down. She started guiding him through the rest of the assignment. "I heard Alfred trying to goad you into another fight," she said, conversationally. "I'm proud you ignored it."

"My dad whooped my ass. I wasn't looking for more problems," said Grayson, and laughed. "Still stings like a bitch."

"Scott's simply a tough-lover. Different generation," she said, and shook her head, sliding the paper to him. "Now do what I'd just shown you on the last ten problems. I'm not going to do your homework for you, Grayson."

"Damn," he said, and snapped his fingers, feigning disappointment. But he was sure he'd gotten the gist of things. After a few minutes of clumsily puzzling through the equations, Grayson finally figured the steps out (though Alexia had gone back on a few, red-penned them,

and told him to do it over, and he did) and got the right answers.

Alexia clapped. "Good job," she said, smiling sardonically.

"Shut up, dork," he said.

"All brawn, no brain?" she teased, and her smile widened.

Grayson chuckled, staring absently at the paper. His writing was horrible compared to Alexia's, which was painfully neat, a perfect Optima. "Hey, Alexia? What happenedâ€" he was going to ask about what had happened in the garden, but was too embarrassed to, and decided against itâ€"back at the Spencer estate. I mean, not the butler and the guy. There was something else. Spencer, he was giving me this really weird look after he'd broken up the fight between you and Birkin."

Alexia frowned. Grayson could tell she knew something, but also knew Alexia well enough to know she wouldn't tell him what that something was. Instead, she said, "Not a clue. Perhaps you'd reminded him of someone, Grayson?" She shrugged. "A son, perhaps? I'd heard Spencer had had an illegitimate son with some Moroccan woman. Sort of torrid love-affair you see in the movies."

"Nah, I'm too pale," he said, and laughed. Then he said, very seriously, "No, it was like he knew something, Alexia. It left me feeling weird. Even weirder than that whole butler-shot-the-naked-guy thing. Which, by the way, I'm still waiting on an explanation for."

"I already gave you one," she said, and stood. "I'm going to retire, Grayson. We've a little over a week until father's event, and he insists I help him with the planning." Alexia pointed at the packet on the desk. "Review your notes. You have a test this Friday."

By the grace of some benevolent god, Grayson had passed Alexia's test with a low "C". She'd quickly graded it, then turned it back over to him and explained, in very precise words, where he'd gone wrong. They spent the next week and a half catching up on his lessons. They reviewed more math, grammar ("No, Grayson. You lay down on the bed, not laid down"), literature (she made him read Shakespeare's Sonnets, which Grayson found he liked) and she'd even begun teaching him a bit of Latin, though he was horrible at it, and some philosophy ("People underestimate the importance of philosophy, Grayson," said Alexia. "It fosters critical thinking and reasoning skills. Everyone can benefit from a little bloody logic in their lives").

Eventually, the day before the big party came. Alexia and Alexander were scrambling to sort out the last-minute details with the planners they'd hired out of Rio. Alexander was fluent in Portuguese, so he'd done the bulk of the work while Alexia cleaned up whatever had gone overlooked. They'd cleared the foyer to accommodate the influx of researchers that would be coming. The two maidsâ€"a younger Swedish woman named Juni, who spoke very little English, and an old Irishwoman named Cara, who was from the Gaeltacht in Waterford County, and only spoke English if she had toâ€"were busy cleaning the west wing: they aired out the studies, scrubbed the balconies, and even prepped Edward Ashford's smoking room, which, Cara had told Grayson, hadn't been used since the early 1950s, and my, what wild

parties Edward had thrown.

"You know," Cara had told him, airing out a throw pillow on the balcony, "F. Scott Fitzgerald had gone to one of those parties, Grayson. Must have been, oh, around 1922, 1923? I was a young woman then, and Edward was quite taken with me, I'll have you know. Swear to the good Lord, that Fitzgerald had gone and wrote a book about Edward's parties. Though I'd never read it, goodness no. It was ungodly stuff, just like that Fitzgerald boy."

"Cara told me The Great Gatsby was based off your grandfather's crazy parties," said Grayson, when he'd found Alexia looking over a checklist in the parlor.

"Oh, don't mind Cara. She's a little senile," said Alexia, checking something off on the list. "True that my grandfather was an admirer of Fitzgerald. But Cara's getting up there in age, Grayson. She's delusional."

"Would be pretty awesome if your grandfather was the inspiration for Jay Gatsby," he said, grinning.

"Father did say grandfather had a bit of a wild side," said Alexia, and laughed.

"So how's the planning coming?"

"Good," said Alexia, and nodded. "Aileen is preparing the food, and I've worked through most of the details. We should be set for tomorrow."

"Then it's off to the Antarctic?" he said.

Alexia nodded again. "Indeed. And back to work for me."

They walked out into the foyer. "Yeah, you mentioned your work at our spot. T-Veronica, right?" Grayson frowned. Then he said, "I don't really like the idea of you playing around with a weird viral strain, or whatever. It sounds really dangerous."

"My job is dangerous," said Alexia, matter-of-factly. "I have it under control, Grayson. The Rockfort labs were my proving ground, and I proved myself. Spencer knows I can run the Antarctica facility, which is why he gave me the position over Birkin. Birkin's smart, but he's not a leader."

"So what about your dad?" asked Grayson.

"Father was politely asked to step down, and he did. The facility is mine now."

Grayson didn't sleep much that night. When he eventually did sleep, it had only seemed like a few minutes. He was shaken awake by Alexia, who was already dressed: a baggy white blouse and slim black jeans rolled up at the ankles, and canvas slip-on shoes. Her head was lit from behind in a nimbus of morning light, and she was grinning.

"Wake up, Grayson," she said, and flicked his nose.

He made a few waking-up noises and sat up. It was sunny outside: a perfect day. "Why so early?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. A huge yawn escaped him. "Party isn't until tonight, right? And it's Saturday, Alexia."

"It's seven o'clock," she said, as if that was far too late for anyone to still be sleeping, and sat on the edge of his bed, making the coil-springs creak.

"Dad have some chores for me today, or something?" he asked, and stood. Barefoot, Grayson padded toward the bathroom he shared with his father. His father's bed was already neatly made, and probably had been since the crack of dawn.

"No, actually. Scott's been rather lenient with you," said Alexia. "I believe he's finally realized you work for ___me___, _and that ___I ___tell you what to do_._"

Grayson didn't argue. There were worse bosses to have than Alexia. He closed the door behind him and ran the shower, talking over the water-hiss. "So what's so important you had to come wake me up yourself?" He stripped and climbed into the shower, shampooing his hair, then rinsing. "Usually Cara, Juni, or dad does."

Alexia's voice was closer. "Apparently the media caught wind of my promotion." She was standing right outside the bathroom door now. Grayson could see her shadow through the gap between the door and the tile. "I suspect father, or perhaps Spencer, had something to do with it."

"But why would they?" he asked, turning the shower off and stepping outside. Grayson stared at his reflection: dark hair framing pale gray eyes. There was a bruise under his eye, where Alfred had struck him, though it had faded to a purplish yellow.

"I'm going to be interviewed by the American News Network." Silence. Then Alexia said, "Publicity, Grayson. Umbrella is always looking for publicity. Or perhaps father is. He's obsessed with 'reviving' the Ashford name. Or perhaps the media simply found out themselves? I was in a few newspapers, when I was ten."

"I remember. What about the party?" Grayson brushed his teeth.

"Everything is still on schedule."

4. Part Two - Continued

A black sedan and van had come up from the public road that wound along the coast and skirted the prison compound, accompanied by guards. A tanned brunette woman in a white Armani suit climbed out from the passenger's seat, and a young cameraman and his crew were struggling to unload the equipment from the bed of the van. Alexia had told Grayson they'd signed some heavy NDAs to get here for an exclusive interview, and the woman looked somewhat frightened, overwhelmed maybe, by the seriousness of Umbrella's don't-talk policy, and perhaps by the guards, with their large plastic aviators and automatic guns, shadowing her.

Alexander stood beside them on The Palace's broad porch. He was dressed in a pale gray suit and trilby hat. "Apologies for the accommodations, Miss Wilkes," he said, waving off the guards, who stepped away, but hovered near their parked jeep, smoking cigarettes. "Precautions, you see. This is a dangerous facility. Umbrella has nothing but your and your crew's safety in mind."

Miss Wilkes nodded. "Of course. It's fine, Dr. Ashford." She looked at Alexia and extended her hand, a silver bracelet catching the sunlight. Miss Wilkes flashed a television smile. Then, in a television voice, said, "My name is Anna Wilkes, American News Network. A pleasure, Miss Ashford. We at ANN thank you for your time, and can't express how grateful we are to you, your family, and Umbrella for this exclusive interview."

Alexia shook her hand and smiled a bit smugly. "No trouble, Miss Wilkes." She gestured at the door. "We'll do the interview in the conference room."

Miss Wilkes looked at Grayson, as they walked. "Are you her brother Alfred?" she asked. "You don't look like twins."

He'd almost wanted to play along and say he was Alfred, but decided against it since Alexander was there, and the memory of his father's belt was still fresh. "Nah. My name's Grayson Harman." The coolness of The Palace's air-conditioned interior rolled across his skin. They crossed the checkered tile, past the receptionist's desk, where the middle-aged receptionist Martin mouthed hello, then talked to someone on the phone in a way-too-important-to-be-interrupted-right-now voice. "I'm the Ashford's butler's son. Alexia's my best friend."

"I wasn't aware Alexia had many friends," said Wilkes. "The articles I'd read made her seem kind of lone-wolffy." Her crew hobbled behind her, awkward under the load of cameras and lighting equipment.

"She doesn't have many friends," said Grayson, and shrugged. In truth, Alexia had no friends beyond him and Alfred. But he wouldn't tell the reporter that. "She's real private."

They set up in the conference room. It was a large burgundy-carpeted room with molding walls, which smelled, faintly, of cigars and expensive whiskey. There was a long U-shaped table with clean coffee mugs, pen pedestals, and cigarette trays, which looked as if they'd been cleaned fairly recently. A big projection screen hung on the wall. The news crew set up near the projector, and Alexia sat at the U-shaped table in a worn ergonomic chair opposite Wilkes. Grayson hung off to the side with Alexander, who wouldn't be participating in the interview, and had probably only come to keep an eye on the visitors.

Once the crew set up, the camera guy let them know, by counting down his fingers, when they went live. Then they were live, and Alexia looked impossibly calm and comfortable, despite countless voyeurs watching her through the television glass.

The interview went as most television interviews do: Alexia was asked how old she was, and where'd she'd gone to school, then several questions about her work, most of which Alexia politely declined to go into detail about. When Wilkes realized she wouldn't get anywhere with those questions, she started asking Alexia personal details:

what her hobbies were, what sort of authors she liked, how being so young and smart had, if it had at all, affected her.

"It didn't affect me," said Alexia, features composed in a look of casual vacancy. "You learn to simply negotiate." Grayson could tell Alexia wasn't being entirely honest about that, and that she was trying her best to look as detached as possible from the topic. "Certainly, it was lonely at times. I am human after all" Alexia smiled: a joke "but I've had a good support base, and a lot to be thankful for."

Wilkes nodded, smiling with white teeth. "You do have a lot to be thankful for, Miss Ashford," she agreed. "You've accomplished things in just thirteen years that others have taken entire lifetimes to achieve. How does that make you feel?"

Alexia was still smiling. She shrugged. "I'm proud of what I've achieved, Miss Wilkes. There isn't much else to be said on the matter."

"What about Dr. William Birkin? Our sources say you're both involved in a sort of rivalry. Do people like that ever get you down, Miss Ashford?"

Alexia hadn't expected that question, and Grayson could see it, briefly, on her face. But she quickly recovered with a laugh. "No, they don't," she said, and shook her head. "William is a brilliant scientist. Second youngest researcher in Umbrella, in fact." Grayson knew that was meant as a jab at Birkin, should Birkin happen to see the interview, because Alexia smiled like a political ad.

Eventually, the interview wrapped up. By noon, the crew had packed their things into the van and were ready to leave. Miss Wilkes thanked Alexander again, then Alexia, and climbed into the black sedan. Grayson watched the jeep full of guards rumble away after the news team, and felt a weird feeling in his stomach, as if that would be the last time he, or anyone else, would ever see Wilkes or the ANN crew again.

It was a warm night. The researchers had started trickling in hours ago, along the Ashford's private road, in black cars decalé with the Umbrella logo. They were mostly senior researchers from the Antarctic facility, and some had even come from Arklay and the Paris Labs, which, as Grayson understood it, were the two most lucrative laboratories in the company right now.

He navigated through a sea of tanned summer flesh. Alexander seemed to share Alexia's love for jazz "or perhaps he'd simply shared his love of jazz with Alexia" and had hired a band out of Chicago. Grayson listened to a woman singing to the energetic noise of drums, string, brass, and piano. He fished a can of soda from a small plastic cooler and made his way to the garden sideline, where the people weren't packed as tight. Alexia was moving through the crowd, shaking hands and smiling, and people were telling her they'd seen the interview, and how she'd done a great job, and that they were really looking forward to collaborating on future projects. Even Adna was there, and had seemed to take Alexia more seriously now: the old woman smiled and grasped Alexia's hand, patting her on the shoulder in the way a grandmother might.

Alexia stood beside Grayson. She was drinking wine from a glass, with all the responsible airs of an adult. "You know," she said, and sipped her wine. "I've noticed you love to hover, Grayson. You're a wallflower."

He watched Alfred wandering the party, talking to Grayson's father. He wondered if Alfred would try to fight him again. "I'm not really great with crowds," he admitted, and popped the tab on his soda can, drinking. "So what's with the party anyway? Gotta be some ulterior motive, right?"

Finishing her wine, Alexia handed the empty glass to one of the servers, who'd been hired locally. "Good question." The jazz band started playing another swing number. She took his hand. "Come on, Grayson."

"I'm not dancing," he said, and furiously shook his head, cheeks burning.

"But you're so good at it!" said Alexia, still tugging at his hand. "Come on. Stop being a baby, Grayson."

"Maybe you're drunk," said Grayson, fighting her. He pushed his feet flat on the ground.

"I had half a glass of wine. I'm not bloody drunk," said Alexia, and she was dragging him out into the party now.

People cleared the way. Other people were dancing too, but it didn't make him feel any better. His ears burned. Alexia grabbed his hand and started leading him. But that just embarrassed him more, and eventually he took control of the dance and guided her into a mid-tempo Lindy hop. He had to keep the footwork easy; Alexia wasn't a bad dancer, but she definitely wasn't on his level yet. Eventually, Grayson forgot, or perhaps had just stopped caring about the people watching them, falling into the dance. The researchers had cleared the way for them, and were clapping and whistling from the sidelines. Except Birkin, whose face Grayson caught in the middle of a spin: he was scowling at them, and Wesker stood on his right, and seemed to be enjoying himself.

Grayson started laughing, bringing Alexia in close. He moved around her, gliding back on his feet and pulling her with him. Alfred was watching, and he actually seemed impressed. Even Grayson's father was whistling and yelling _thattaboy_, _kiddo_, _thattaboy_.

The song ended, and people starting applauding. Grayson blushed, remembering where he was again. Then he bowed, sweat sliding down the slope of his nose, still holding Alexia's hand. The band started playing a slower number again, and Grayson left the impromptu dance-floor while the adults went back to drinking and talking, or fox-trotting to the music.

"That was impressive, Alexia," said Alfred, approaching her and grinning. Grayson's father loomed behind him. "I didn't know you could dance."

"Grayson taught me," said Alexia, and giggled.

"And I taught Grayson," said Scott, like a proud dad. "Chip off the old block, kiddo."

"Thanks, dad," said Grayson, scratching his head.

"Better than that drop and lock shit you do," said his father.

"Pop and lock, dad."

Alfred stared at Grayson and narrowed his eyes. "I suppose you didn't do too poorly," he said, though Grayson knew Alfred didn't actually mean that; it was more or less to make his sister happy. "Harman," he added, with a bit of an edge.

"Alfred, please don't kill my mood," said Grayson. "I don't wanna fight."

"No fighting," said Grayson's father, shooing Alfred off. "You be good over there for a bit, Al, and I'll tell you my Iwo Jima story."

That seemed to make Alfred happy. Before he left, he looked at Alexia and said, "I need to talk to you about something important later, dear sister. Regarding father." And then he was gone.

"And you don't go starting anything with Al," said his father, giving Grayson a hard look. "You got me?"

"Didn't plan on it, dad," said Grayson, and meant it.

"Good." His father left.

Alexander rang his glass with a fork to get the attention of the party-goers, standing on the band-stage. "I'd like to steal a moment of your time," he said, smiling brilliantly. He wore a white suit with a pink silk tie, and looked like someone out of a Fitzgerald novel. "As some of you might be aware, there's a bit more to this party than simple data-exchange." He gestured for Alexia, his emerald ring catching the string-lights and glowing a Pensacola green. "Would you join me up here a moment, dear daughter?"

Alexia made her way on-stage, and stood beside him. Grayson pushed to the front of the crowd to hear them better. "As some of you might also be aware—and some of you might not, as I understand news sometimes travels slowly to our friends in the European labs—my daughter has been named the new director of the Antarctica facility by Lord Spencer. Now, some of you might be under the impression I'm sore at losing my position to my daughter. Some of you are also under the impression I am a failure—which, I suppose, is partly true—and deserve the demotion."

A few people muttered to each other. Grayson could see Birkin, not too far away, practically grinding his teeth while Wesker tried to keep him calm.

Alexander put his hand on Alexia's slim shoulder and continued, "But my mistakes will be rectified by my daughter: the pride of the Ashford family. She's going to do great things for my father's company, and I couldn't imagine anyone but my dear Alexia in this critical role. For too long, I've failed to resuscitate the things

that once made my family great: our scientific advances, our charities, our long English history, starting with the brilliant matriarch Veronica Ashford, who'd founded our line. But that all changes today."

Alexia stood by her father, stolid. Alexander spoke. "Alexia is everything Veronica was: a young, brilliant girl—a girl who embodies the very essence of what it means to be an Ashford, of what it means to be Umbrella. So I've organized this party as my official passing of the torch." He looked at Alexia and smiled, conjuring a ballpoint pen from his jacket, showing it to the crowd, and passing it to her with the reverence of some holy fragile thing: the torch. "Though Lord Spencer has officially overturned my position, dear daughter, I wanted to personally turn it over to you, however figurative it might be. And so, I name you Senior Director of the Antarctic facility, and greatly anticipate the wonderful things you'll accomplish not only for this family, but for Umbrella. Cheers."

Alexia studied the ballpoint pen with an amused look, then nodded, tucking it into the breast pocket of her blouse. "I assure you, father," she said. "I have great plans." Then she left the stage, and the band started playing again, and was gone.

Grayson left the party. The gazebo was empty when he got there. It was one of his father's favorite spots: he'd planted blue primroses and red geraniums, and Brazilian lilies around the gazebo. He sat down, watching the figures of the party in the distance, hands in the pockets of his jeans. And heard something nearby: voices. One was definitely Alexia, and the other sounded like Wesker. He followed the voices; they were talking by the wrought-iron fence that overlooked the sea.

"Not much of a speech-giver?" asked Wesker. He stood beside Alexia, a tall silhouette against the swollen white moon. He wore jeans and a button-up shirt. "You're quite the dancer, though," he added, and chuckled.

Alexia was much shorter than Wesker, and barely came up to his abdomen. "Grayson taught me," she said, folding her arms. "As for speech-giving, no, I'm not. What's the point of speeches when you're not aiming to inspire? Actions speak louder than words, Dr. Wesker."

"Please, just Albert is fine," said Albert. "Grayson, he's the boy with the dark hair, right? The one who was with you at Spencer's mansion and saw—" "

"He saw the specimen, yes," said Alexia, and nodded. Grayson kept out of sight, behind the hedge. "But it's not important. It was taken care of." She shrugged. Then, "I received an interesting call from Spencer this afternoon. He was asking about Grayson and insisted to speak to father. Do you know anything about that, Albert?"

Grayson couldn't imagine what Spencer would want with him. But then he remembered the way Spencer had smiled at him in the Arklay mansion. He listened, hoping Wesker might let something slip. "Couldn't say," said Wesker, and seemed to honestly mean that. "Lord Spencer rarely speaks to anyone, especially when it comes to dealing with Dr. Marcus, my and Birkin's mentor. They had some sort of

falling out, as I understand it, though I don't know the details. I just know there's tension, and it's thick, Alexia." He pantomimed a knife. "You could cut it."

Alexia nodded. "I observed that. The Americans were rather aloof to the scientists from the Paris labs, and vice versa. There's a great deal of distrust in Umbrella, Albert. I can't imagine that was my grandfather's initial intention when he'd founded the company."

"Helped found it," Wesker politely corrected. "And you're still young. You haven't spent enough time in the company to really see it, Alexia, but the smart thing is to always be on your guard. This business is cutthroat"quite literally."

"Given the sort of work we handle, I don't doubt it," said Alexia. "People are always trying to gain a leg-up on the competition"it's human nature to strive for dominance." She sighed, then said, with a half-smile, "Should I be wary of you, Albert? Is this all some elaborate ploy to pry for project data?"

Wesker shrugged. Then he smiled, but it was one of those smiles people wore when they were trying to be polite, or gloss over a mistake. Grayson called them retail smiles. "You should be wary of everyone, Alexia," he said, very seriously. "That's lesson one, and one you would do well to remember if you intend to go as far as your father says you will in Umbrella." He paused. "Speaking of which, Alexander's a bit of a showboater, isn't he?"

"Father does love to talk," said Alexia. "He's quite in love with the Ashford name. Legacy. Whatever you'd like to call it. Alfred believes in that rubbish more than I do. A name is just a name, an identity marker."

"And it's quite a famous name these days. I saw the ANN interview," said Wesker, and grinned. "Caught it while I was eating lunch in the Arklay staff lounge. People in Raccoon have heard about you, too."

"It's just a name," said Alexia, and shook her head. "It's the barcode whatever government you happen to live under assigns you."

"You sound rather cynical about your family, Alexia. I'm a little surprised."

"No, cynicism isn't quite what it is," said Alexia. "Fallibilism would be more accurate, Albert. I'm a fallibilist when it comes to my family."

Grayson strode up toward Alexia and Wesker, hands in his pockets. He pretended he hadn't heard anything about Spencer. "Been looking for you, Alexia," he lied. Then, to Wesker, "Hey, Wesker."

"Hello, Grayson. Am I trespassing on a date?" asked Wesker, amused.

Grayson cleared his throat and shook his head. "Nope," he said, and grabbed the wrought-iron fence, climbing up so he was level with Wesker, and because he liked the view of the sea. He watched the

water, then turned around, fingers still curled around the bars, and added, "And it isn't like that. Alexia's just a friend, man."

"Of course, my apologies," said Wesker, and Grayson could tell he wasn't actually sorry about anything. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you both become such close friends?"

"I've always lived with the Ashfords," said Grayson.

"His father started working for my grandfather," explained Alexia. "Believe that was either the late Fifties, or perhaps the early Sixties. Father can't seem to recall, and grandfather is dead, so we can't ask him."

Wesker nodded. Birkin approached the group, looking as sour as he had when Grayson had danced with Alexia. When he saw Alexia, the little muscle in Birkin's jaw twitched. "We need to get back, Albert," he said, very carefully, as if every word needed to be handled like the gun in Russian Roulette. "Marcus just called."

"A shame. I was enjoying the festivities," said Wesker, and sighed. "All right, William. I'll be on my way momentarily."

Birkin nodded, then said to Alexia, "Congratulations on the Antarctica facility, Ashford. Hear it's a real fucking backwater."

"For something that's a backwater, you seem awfully bitter about it, William," said Alexia, and smiled.

Birkin's mouth became a thin, hard line. But he didn't say anything, and left in stiff, angry strides, kicking a rock, hard, on his way out, into a lamppost outside the mansion. Wesker spoke. "It was a pleasure, Alexia. Perhaps we'll have a chance to talk at greater length later."

"I'm sure we will, Albert," said Alexia, and nodded.

Wesker smiled, then left.

"Is he your boyfriend or something?" asked Grayson, frowning.

"Grayson. He's twenty-three."

A little after midnight, most of the party-goers had already gone. Grayson helped his father clean up the food, the plates, sweep up whatever garbage—though there wasn't much: a few streamers, a beer can or two, the occasional piece of food—the researchers had left. A few of the locals Alexander had hired stayed behind to help clean, though none of them spoke English, and the ones who did spoke very little. Then Grayson headed back to the mansion and went to sleep.

5. Part Two - End

A day later, they'd returned to the Antarctic facility. Grayson followed Alexia down a ferroconcrete hallway, where young researchers rushed to shake hands with her, or hand her folders stuffed with

print-outs and memos. Pamphlets advertising Umbrella's healthcare benefits were tacked on the corkboards here, faces of poster-scientists smiling emptily at him. Shatterproof windows showed labs, where scientists in white coats navigated complicated machines, their faces expressionless.

They reached the mansion and settled in. It looked like a 1920s hotel lobby, and smelled like one: Honduran cigars and bourbon, and some nameless sweet perfume, which might have been the perfume of several generations of Ashford women, years-ingrained in the very fabric of the mansion, until the scent had become a part of it. The floor was made up of polished marble slabs. A long Persian runner went up the stairwell, and, like the stairs in the Spencer estate, divided into two smaller staircases that went left and right, and up to the balustrade. An art deco chandelier hung from the ceiling, which was domed, and painted in a beautiful fresco depicting a Renaissance-dark maelstrom of Greek tragic heroes.

"Don't remember this place being so swanky," said Grayson, almost hesitating to step inside, where his shoes would dirty the perfect floors.

"We had a few things added," said Alexia, and went aside.

They split up on the second floor. The twins had gone to their rooms, and Alexander had gone to his laboratory. Grayson had his own room in this mansion. It was modestly large. There was a bed with thick blankets and goose-down pillows; a writing desk with stationary, flanked by bookcases; rosewood dressers with brass knobs; a big closet he could actually step inside. A single window looked out over the fake yard, and the fake blue summer sky.

Once Grayson had put away his things, his father said he could explore the facility ("Just don't bother the scientists, and stay where you belong, kiddo." And Grayson had been okay with that, because he'd never really seen the facility beyond the mansion, and wanted to). So he explored, keeping away from the places labeled HAZARD and LABORATORY in bright blocky fonts. Most of the facility was just an enormous concrete maze that reminded Grayson of the tunnels in an ant farm. Shatterproof windows showed identical stainless steel labs, each full of people who'd started to look identical in their white coats and plastic goggles, as if the facility was just self-replicating itself like the protein chains in a DNA helix. On his way, Grayson bumped into Alexander, who was talking to some guy in a lab coat and suit.

"Grayson, I've been meaning to talk to you," said Alexander, and smiled. His suit was a sober brown one, and he was wearing a lab coat. "Come with me to my office, my boy."

The old guy in the white coat looked at Grayson and smiled. Grayson recognized him: Martin Bingham, the chief medical director. There was something deeply unsettling about Bingham's watery hazel eyes, beyond the thick round lenses of his glasses; his eyes, Grayson decided, made him think of serial killers. "Ah, Grayson Harman. Nice to see you again. How's your head?" The old man smiled emptily, with nicotine-stained teeth. His hair was cut short and black. He sported a beard too, and was almost a dead-ringer for a younger Sigmund Freud.

"It healed up just fine," said Grayson. He'd been eleven, and Alexia had been nine, and it had been the first time he'd visited the Antarctic facility. They'd been playing out in front of the mansion—he was pretty sure it had been tag—and he'd gotten rough, so Alexia had pushed him into the reflecting pool. He'd hit his head on the bottom and split it open, and it was Bingham who'd stapled his head shut.

"Ah, Dr. Bingham, we'll discuss our thing later," said Alexander, and cleared his throat. Then, to Grayson, "Come along, Grayson."

Grayson did. They went to Alexander's office, which was surprisingly small and out of the way. There was a low British Colonial shelf stuffed with books on virology and anatomy. Alexander sat at a desk of lacquered wood and put on a pair of gold wire-frame reading glasses, shuffling through papers.

"Am I in trouble, Sir?" asked Grayson, closing the door behind him. Alexander gestured to a leather chair opposite his desk: have a seat. Grayson sat, nervous. "If it's about dancing with Alexia, I'm sorry. Or if it's about punching Alfred, I'm sorry about that, too."

Alexander laughed and shook his head. "I haven't seen such a nicely done Lindy Hop since my father was alive," he said. "As for Alfred? No. I love my son dearly, but I'm sure he did something to deserve it." He looked at Grayson with eyes so pale and blue, they were almost see-through. "I'm aware of your little rivalry with Alfred, and how much he enjoys pushing your buttons."

Grayson was relieved. With a bit more courage now, he asked, "So what's going on, Sir?"

"Umbrella recently funneled down orders," he said, showing Grayson a print-out. There was a lot of legal jargon there; it looked like a contract. "Due to the outbreak that had almost occurred at the Spencer Estate, Umbrella is now requiring everyone to complete monthly health screenings. To prevent infection, you see."

"You mean that guy was actually a zombie, Sir? Nah, no way. Zombies aren't real."

Alexander didn't answer him. Instead, he just smiled. "I need you to sign the contract, Grayson."

There was something about Alexander's expression that made Grayson nervous. It wasn't a particularly evil look. In fact, it was too pleasant: a retail smile. "What happens if I don't, Sir?" he asked, very cautiously.

Alexander shrugged. "Nothing. I'd simply be forced to move you and your father back to Rockfort."

That meant Grayson wouldn't see Alexia for months, maybe ever. Grayson stared at the dotted line his signature was supposed to go. Alexander handed him a pen. Grayson hesitated, bringing the pen down, hovering just above the line, thinking. He bit his lip, then signed his name in sloppy quasi-cursive.

Alexander collected the paper and bobbed his head. "Thank you,

Grayson. I assure you, it's nothing invasive. Standard check-ups, really." He stood and motioned toward the door. "Alexia is in her office, two levels down. Here." Alexander handed him a print-out of the facility map. "Do be careful, my boy. It's easy to get lost in this facility."

Grayson nodded, looked the map over, then left, feeling empty, as if he'd just signed his soul away. But he put the thought from his mind, following the map to Alexia's office. On this level, there was an enormous ant-hive. Ants swarmed it, their swollen abdomens glittering like fat licorice pieces in the light of the halogen inlays.

Alexia's office was in a hallway to his left. There was another door at the end of it, though it was one of those blast-proof doors that looked like something out of the Fort Knox vaults, and was sealed when he'd tried to open it. "You can't go in there," said Alexia. She was standing in the doorway of her office, in a lab coat, and a one-piece herringbone dress.

"What the fuck is in there? Tartarus?" he asked.

"No. It's my lab." Alexia stepped aside, letting him through the door to her office. "Or maybe it really is Tartarus." She grinned and closed the door behind her.

Alexia's office was a bit bigger than Alexander's, but not by much. The walls were papered in Victorian stripes. A brass gas-lamp lit the interior in dreary Poe-light. There was a desk of polished Vietnamese rosewood layered in stacks of files and print-outs, several antique-looking dressers, filing cabinets, a coffee table and a Victorian couch. There was another room on his left: there were several tanks filled with sand and ants in there, a computer, a table with a microscope and glass laboratory flasks, and an uncomfortable-looking stool.

Alexia wandered over to a record-player on an end-table. Anita O' Day started singing Old Devil Moon. She sat down at her desk, took the pen her father had given her from the breast pocket of her lab coat, and started writing something. "So is there something I can do for you, Grayson? Or is this a social visit?" She smiled, glancing up at him.

Grayson decided to tell her about the paper he'd signed, because it had made him feel uncomfortable. "Your dad made me sign something," he said.

She stopped writing and looked at him. Her expression was weird, bordering suspicion. "What did you sign?" she asked.

"I think it was a contract," said Grayson. "Something about health screenings, then something about an outbreak that had almost happened at the Spencer Estate."

Her expression didn't change. "Do you still have the paper on you?"

He shook his head. "Your dad took it. He said it came down from the big-wigs, and that I had to sign it. Or he'd send me back to Rockfort with dad."

Alexia stared at him for a moment. There was a beige phone on her desk, and a laminated list of numbers and extensions taped beside it. She took the phone off its cradle and punched in an extension. She let it ring. Grayson heard someone's garbled voice on the other end. "This is Director Ashford, Dr. Bingham," she said, in a telemarketer voice. "I'd like to ask you about something..."

While Alexia talked, Grayson perused her vinyl collection. He found Escape in its acid-drippy sleeve, and was surprised because he definitely didn't think Alexia was a Journey fan, and almost laughed because she was. There were classical albums—mostly Shostakovich and Erik Satie—and several jazz albums: Frank Sinatra, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Anita O'Day, Cab Calloway, Glenn Miller, Nat King Cole... She even had some Depeche Mode, and The Cure's Pornography album.

"Pretty awesome collection," he said aloud.

Alexia was hanging up the phone, and looked confused, as if she was thinking of something, and it wasn't adding up. When she'd finally registered his voice, she said, "Music makes the long, quiet hours of research more bearable." She looked at him, apologetic. "I'm sorry, Grayson. But I have to make some important calls."

He understood. "Sure," said Grayson, heading to the door. When he opened it, Alfred shouldered past him. "I'll meet you later, yeah?" he added, defiantly.

"I'll see you at the mansion," said Alexia, and smiled. "Alfred needs to speak with me about something, and I've a bit of research to do still. So I might be late."

Grayson looked at Alfred, who looked impatient, as if he was counting down the seconds until Grayson was out the door. "If I'm sleeping by the time you're back," he said, "feel free to wake me up." He smiled, then left. He heard Alfred say it's about father, but Grayson was already around the corner, and out of earshot.

The fake sky beyond his window was dark. He lay awake in the bed, unable to sleep. His mind kept looping the conversation he'd overheard on Rockfort: Spencer had given me a call this afternoon. He was asking about Grayson... And then Alexander had made him sign some sort of contract. Grayson flipped over and buried his face in his pillow. He glanced at the digital clock on his night-stand: 1:02 am. And, at some point, had drifted into dreamless sleep.

A month passed. He'd spent the majority of the month helping his father clean the mansion: they'd waxed the marble, dusted, vacuumed the rugs, made the beds, deep-cleaned the bathrooms. Grayson hadn't seen Alexander at all, and guessed he'd gone away on business for Umbrella. The twins had been scarce too.

He'd been in the middle of dusting off a marble bust of Veronica Ashford when Bingham had shown up at the mansion. "It's screening day," said Bingham, smiling with his dull teeth and limping inside. Grayson had been told the limp was from when he'd taken a bullet in the Second World War. "I thought I'd personally retrieve you, Grayson. See how you're doing."

"Nobody mentioned it to me," said Grayson, stuffing the cleaning rag into his back pocket.

His father had been re-varnishing the balustrade. He stared at Bingham for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then wiped his forehead with the back of his wrist and went back to work.

"Twice a month, lad," said Bingham, and nodded.

Grayson looked at his father, who gave him a look that said _go on, kiddo_. He nodded, then followed Bingham out.

They went through several corridors, past Alexia's ant-hive (he'd hoped to see her, but she was nowhere to be found) and rode a lift to the medical wing. Grayson could tell the walk had been taxing on Bingham; he was wincing as they approached the clerk's desk, where a nurse in Umbrella whites sat behind a computer terminal. Umbrella's red-white hexagon loomed over the desk with the company's tag-line: _Preserving the Health of the People__._

"Welcome back, Dr. Bingham," said the nurse. The nurse might have been a tanned white guy, or a light-skinned black guy, or maybe Hispanic. "Everything is ready. Go ahead through." The man smiled with perfect white teeth.

"Thank you," said Bingham, patting the man on the shoulder before guiding Grayson through an automated glass door.

A long hallway of medical tile, white walls, and chrome accents, lit by fluorescent tubes. Through more shatterproof glass, Grayson saw doctors and nurses dressed in white scrubs watching computer feeds, measuring fluids in glass flasks and beakers, reviewing radiographs, studying petri dishes through highly technical microscopes. In one lab, there was a man on an op-slab, and there was a blue plastic sheet over him while the doctor and a team of nurses performed some kind of surgery, blood staining the fingers of their yellow latex gloves.

Bingham must have noticed he'd been staring. He said, "Don't worry, my boy. We're not cutting you open. That fellow is with the construction team working on the new sub-level. Had an unfortunate accident with a steel beam. Might lose his leg, but he'll be fine."

They entered an empty lab. Bingham told him to strip, and Grayson did. He was given one of those paper hospital gowns, which he put on without enthusiasm. Bingham directed him to a slab, like the one he'd seen the man on, and said he'd be a moment. Grayson watched Bingham calibrate some sort of scanner: it was a long black plastic cylinder with a curved rubber grip, and three sharp prongs on one end, and a small square digital screen.

The examination started off pretty standard: Bingham checked his heart, his lungs, his reflexes, and said he was fine. Then took out the scanner thing. "It's new technology from Umbrella," Bingham explained.

Bingham cleaned the skin with iodine, then gently pushed the three prongs through Grayson's skin and hit the thumb-switch. There was a sharp, painful jab. Grayson hissed. Then the strange, uncomfortable

sensation of his blood being sucked up through a tube. "What the hell is happening?" asked Grayson, feeling scared.

"Collecting a blood sample to process, dear boy." Bingham watched the digital screen, nodded, then dislodged the thing from Grayson's arm. Blood bubbled from the wound it had left. Bingham calmly wiped it away with gauze, and started to bandage his arm.

"What are you processing it for? What happens if you find something?"

Bingham didn't answer. He ejected a small glass tube from the device; it was filled with Grayson's blood. He handed it to the nurse, murmured something in her ear (Grayson was sure he'd heard _project _and _Alexia_) and waved her off.

Grayson was released from the medical wing a quarter past noon. He felt wrong. He was positive Bingham had said something about Alexia and a project, so Grayson headed to her office, praying she was there, and hoping she'd answer his questions. Inside, he was glad to see Alexia was, in fact, there, and she was studying the ant tanks in the laboratory annex. Billie Holiday crooned _Strange Fruit _from the record-player.

There was something weird in Alexia's expression, Grayson noticed: a sort of obsessive darkness that didn't belong on a thirteen-year-old's face. "Alexia?" he said.

Alexia spun around and clutched her clipboard to her chest, pale. "Don't ever sneak up on me like that, Grayson," she hissed, throwing her clipboard at him, which bounced harmlessly off his chest. The darkness was gone from her face, though hung in the deeps of her eyes like unfriendly shadows. "Are you _trying _to give me a bloody heart-attack?"

"No. Relax," he said, putting his hands up. He scooped the clipboard up and looked at it: notes on ant colonies and colony dynamics, though he didn't really understand anything else on the paper. Grayson handed it back to her. "I haven't seen you in a month."

"I've been busy," said Alexia, turning back to her ant tanks. "Is there something I can do for you, Grayson?"

"Bingham. I just got back from the medical wing. He took my blood."

Alexia stopped writing, and said, without looking at him, "You did?"

"Do you know what's up?" asked Grayson. "I think I heard him say something about a project. And your name."

Alexia didn't answer him. Instead, she started writing again, the sound of a pen scratching across paper hanging in the air between them like a ghost. "I'm talking to the Board of Directors about it, Grayson," she said finally. "I'll take care of it. Father lied to you."

"What's happening?" he asked, and stood beside her, watching the ants

skittering through the colony tunnels. Grayson knitted his eyebrows. "What did your dad make me sign?"

"I can't say. Unfortunately, Umbrella has me under NDA. It was a clause in my contract," she said, giving him a genuinely apologetic look. "But what I can tell you is this: it wasn't good, and it definitely wasn't something the Board sent down. Father tricked you into giving him your consent for a project."

"Am I gonna die?"

Alexia set her clipboard down and tucked the pen she'd been writing with inside the breast pocket of her lab coat. Then she hugged him around the waist and said, "No. You're not going to die."

Grayson didn't know how to react; he hadn't expected Alexia to hug him. Awkwardly, he hugged her back, and was reminded of the night on Rockfort when she'd held his hand, and Alfred had punched him. "What about Bingham?" he asked.

"You don't have to worry about Bingham. I'm going to talk to him," she said, looking up at him.

"Talk?"

Alexia nodded. "I don't intend to fire him; he's on to something quite ingenious." She smiled. "But I will tell him there will be no more testing on you."

That worked well enough for Grayson. "What about your dad?"

Her expression collapsed. "Don't worry about him," said Alexia, without elaboration. Her tone was strange: for some reason, it made Grayson think of cold gray water, and a cold gray sky.

6. Part Three

Several months had passed, and they were already coming up on Halloween. Alexander had never come back. Grayson had heard the staff say it had been suicide, and though he didn't entirely believe that, he'd come to accept that as the truth. Alexia had become the family head, now that Alexander was gone. Alfred had willingly submitted to the decision, reasoning she was much more qualified than he was for the responsibility. Bingham had never called on Grayson again; Alexia had told him she'd sorted things out with the Board, after several hearings, and a great deal of paperwork. So he'd spent his time working alongside his father and minding his own business.

He'd seen advertisements around the facility for the Halloween staff-mixer. Grayson stayed in his room and pored over magazines for costume ideas, having a hard time choosing between Michael Jackson, or one of the Blues Brothers. His stomach growled. Grayson got up, wondering if his dad had made anything for lunch.

The twins were coming around the corner when he'd left his room. Alfred barely acknowledged him, but Alexia stopped, smiled, then said, "Grayson, mind coming with us? We're going to the sun-room."

He didn't really have time to say anything but _yes_, and followed them. The sun-room was at the top of the mansion, and where Alexia and Alfred had played as toddlers. Grayson had only vague memories of the place. The toys were gone now, save Alfred's battle-table, and the space was occupied by more of Alexia's ant colonies and bug farms.

Alfred handed him a Betacam camcorder. "We need to record this, Harman," he said. "It's for Alexia's research."

Grayson looked at the camera, nodded, then switched it on. He peered through the lens, watching Alfred remove a dragonfly from one of Alexia's bug farms—and begin to pluck its wings off. It wriggled helplessly between his thumb and finger. Grayson shivered, weirded out by the entire thing, but kept the camcorder rolling. Alfred dropped the dragonfly into the ant farm. A thousand little black ants skittered out from their hive and converged on the dying creature, then started to eat it.

"What the fuck does this have to do with anything?" asked Grayson.

"Colony dynamics, Grayson," said Alexia, observing mildly. She approached the farm, watching the ants devour the dragonfly. "It's for my research on the T-Veronica."

Alfred watched his sister with a look that made Grayson's skin crawl. Alexia didn't notice at first, or pretended not to. Then, when Alfred wouldn't stop, she looked at her brother and asked, pointedly, "What are you looking at, Alfred?"

Alfred blushed and shook his head. "Nothing, Alexia," he lied, moving away from the ant farm. He feigned disinterest, wandering over to a bookshelf and randomly selecting a leather-bound book on entomology. Alfred flipped through the thin yellowing pages, composing his features in a look of casual boredom.

Once the ants had finished with the dragonfly, Grayson cut the camcorder. Then said, quietly to Alexia, "Your brother is starting to weird me out."

"To be honest, he's starting to weird me out as well," Alexia admitted, and shook her head. She smiled and snuck a kiss on Grayson's cheek, while Alfred's back was turned.

Grayson felt heat suffuse his cheeks. "You going to the Halloween staff-mixer?" he asked, trying to act casual, and failing miserably.

"No. I have research to do," said Alexia, and paused. "Why?" she asked. "Are you going?"

"Yeah. I was hoping you'd maybe wanna go as my da—"

Alexia giggled. "Are you asking me out on a date, Grayson?"

He looked at Alfred, just to be sure he couldn't hear them, and nodded. "Yeah."

"Well, in that case," said Alexia, touching his hands, "I couldn't

really say no, could I? That would be awfully rude." She grinned, leaned toward him and added, "Besides, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to."

The staff-mixer was pretty much every office Halloween party ever—or what he imagined every office Halloween party ever to be like. There were researchers dressed as vampires, Frankensteins, zombies, and one guy was dressed as Dr. Frank N. Furter from Rocky Horror Picture Show. All of them were crowded into the rec-lounge, which wasn't very big, and where Halloween music boomed over the speakers, and Grayson could barely hear himself, or other people talking, unless he was very close to them. He found Alexia waiting for him, and, just as he'd expected, she wasn't wearing a costume. She was wearing a gray cardigan and black dress.

Alexia laughed when she saw him. "You look so ridiculous," she said.

"Michael Jackson from Billie Jean, baby," said Grayson, grinning and backsliding toward her.

"You even have the hair," she said, still laughing.

"Hey, if I'm gonna pay homage to one of my favorite musicians ever, might as well go all out," said Grayson. "So where's brother dearest? Alfred duck out of the party?"

"He got food poisoning," said Alexia, matter-of-factly. "I think it was the bloody cake."

The room was too hot from all the bodies crowded together. And the party was pretty lame too, but he'd expected as much from a bunch of socially awkward nerds. Grayson looked at Alexia and motioned toward the door. Though, before they left, he snagged some food from the buffet, and even managed to swipe a beer for himself.

"A beer, Grayson? Seriously?"

They stood in the main atrium. "Hey, nobody was looking," he said, and used the railing to pop the cap off the bottle. Grayson sipped, then offered it to her. "Want some?"

Alexia stared at the bottle. She took it from him and drank, making a face. "This stuff is awful," she said, passing it back.

"Acquired taste. I sneak beers from my old man all the time," he said.

"You're horrible, Grayson," said Alexia, and grinned. Though it was muffled, Grayson could hear _Time Warp_ playing behind them, beyond the rec-lounge door. "I'm actually glad you didn't want to stay in the party."

"So am I. It's fucking lame in there," he said, and laughed.

"Don't look at me. I didn't organize the event. I simply said it was okay," said Alexia.

"You're lame, Alexia. But not _that_ lame. It's fine," he said, and finished his beer.

"Well, thank you, Grayson. I'm glad my lameness is tolerable enough for you."

"Hey, Alexia," he said. "Since you sorted things out with the Board, are you able to tell me about that paper Alexander had me sign?"

She shook her head. "I can't go into details," said Alexia. "As I said before, I'm bound by a contract clause. But I will tell you this: it was an experimental program started by Lord Spencer, and one of his best scientists. That's all I can say, I'm afraid."

Grayson nodded, relieved Alexia had helped him dodge that bullet. He looked at her. Before he could say thank you, Alexia pulled him down and kissed him. It had happened so quickly that his mind hadn't immediately registered it; then, slowly, the reality—that her lips were actually touching his, and that she liked it as much as he did, or seemed to—dawned on him, and he kissed her back. They stayed like that for a few awkward moments, which, gradually, became less awkward, and more natural. Then she broke away and shy-smiled, her cheeks and nose pink.

"So are we, like, dating now?" asked Grayson, blushing. "I mean. That definitely wasn't a, uh, just-friends kiss."

"I guess?" said Alexia, awkwardly. "I mean, we're barely teenagers, so I don't know what one would actually call it. I do like you, Grayson. A lot. I have for a while." She paused, then said in practically one breath, "But I realize I'm a bit of a nerd, and you could probably date much prettier, much cooler girls, but..."

It was sobering seeing Alexia act so girl-like. Grayson was used to her always being the adult between the two of them, but now, now she was just a typical thirteen-year-old girl, who knew as much about love and relationships as a typical thirteen-year-old girl should. "I guess you'd still call it dating," he said, and shrugged. "I'm actually glad things wound up like this," he admitted. "Been crushing on you for a long time too, Alexia. Since I was, like, nine."

"Really?" she said.

"Yeah," said Grayson. "You act like you're surprised."

"Suppose I am."

"Why?"

"We're very different people," said Alexia. "You're... normal."

"You mean I'm not super smart like you. Yeah," he said, and laughed.

"That's part of it," said Alexia. She was quiet. Then, cautiously, "What if I wasn't a real person, Grayson?" She looked at him. "What if I was just a copy of someone?"

"What are you talking about? Like a clone?" Grayson laughed. "You're real, Alexia. You're standing here and—" Grayson reached out and poked her cheek, grinning—"I can touch you. Besides, there's no

such things as clones. You're just being weird. Maybe too much time around your science shit."

"Answer the question, Grayson. Would it matter to you?"

He stared at her, a little surprised by the seriousness of her question. Then he said, "No. It wouldn't," and meant it. "You're standing here, all bones and flesh like me. That's as real as it gets, Alexia."

Alexia smiled. She kissed him again, and this time, there was what Grayson could only describe as the __spark_: that elusive feeling described in movies and books, which ignites hormonal wildfires. A cellular certainty, woven into the very proteins of human DNA, which says a specific person is your ideal mate, and that nobody else can cut it. And there, in that moment, as Alexia kissed him again, was the feeling Grayson felt.

A few weeks later, they flew into Narita. They were attending the International Health Convention in Tokyo. It was an annual event run by Umbrella that showcased their latest projects in medical science, alongside projects from several other prominent companies within the Global Pharmaceutical Consortium. Grayson followed the twins and his father down the shiny concourse, stopping at a vending machine that sold hot canned coffee. He fed 100 yen into the slot and followed them outside. It was raining; it wasn't too cold, but wasn't very warm either.

They piled into a rented BMW driven by a stolid Japanese man in a suit, and were taken to a Hilton in Shinjuku, which Umbrella had rented out to board their researchers. The hotel, like the rest of Tokyo, was impossibly modern and sleek. The lobby was mostly empty, save for a matronly German woman in the lounge (Alexia introduced her as Frida Weber, from Umbrella's Berlin labs, who told them in careful English she'd just flown in two hours ago, and was very tired) and her young companion Alfonse, who Alexia introduced as Frida's son.

Grayson waited while his father checked in with the front-desk clerk, a smiling young Japanese woman in pinstripe. He watched Frida flipping through a pamphlet advertising Hokkaido winter-sports, and Alexia, who was talking to Alfonse in German while Alfred sifted through the spread of Vogue and Times magazines on the lounge table.

A steady trickle of researchers came through the revolving doors. Grayson didn't recognize any of them, except Birkin and Wesker.

"Grayson, so nice to see you," said Wesker. He was dressed in a black turtleneck and jeans, and as always, wore his sunglasses, the lobby lights flowing across the lenses.

Birkin muttered something that might have been hi, though Grayson couldn't be sure. He wore a rain-stained nylon windbreaker, and a denim button-up shirt and jeans, and looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks.

Alexia said something to Alfonse in German that was probably bye, and stood beside Grayson. She flashed a shit-eating grin at Birkin.

"Oh, Birkin," she said. "I see your skin is clearing up a bit. Did you finally take my advice and see a dermatologist?"

Birkin scowled. "Ashford," he muttered, roughly shouldering past her, struggling under the weight of his bags. When he reached the front-desk, Birkin looked at his wristwatch, then said, loudly, "Can I get some fucking help, please?"

One of the Japanese bellhops awkwardly gathered Birkin's bags, straining under the weight, stumbling toward the elevator and muttering under his breath in Japanese. Stupid foreigner, dumb gaijin, fucking asshole, I hope you die painfully were some of the things Grayson imagined the bellhop was saying, and it made him laugh. "What the fuck does Birkin have in those bags, Wesker? Dead babies?"

"Equipment mostly," said Wesker, amused. "Birkin has a horrible habit of over-packing for trips abroad."

"I thought I was bad," said Alexia, and shook her head. They watched Birkin get into the elevator beside the bellhop, who he repeatedly told stop that, that's fragile! Don't hold it like that, idiot, or you're going to break it before the doors closed, and they couldn't hear him anymore. "Charming man," said Alexia dryly.

"Birkin isn't so bad when you get to know him," said Wesker, smirking. "He's like those candies. What are they called? Sour Patch Kids?"

"You suck him and he gets sweeter?" said Grayson, unable to help himself. Behind him, Alexia pantomimed a drum, said badumtish, then started laughing.

"Okay, I walked into that one," Wesker conceded, laughing. He shook his head. Then, to Alexia, "So do you have anything you're showcasing for the convention, Alexia? Or are you playing spectator this year?"

"I have something for the private showcase to the Board," she said, and shrugged.

Wesker nodded. "Keeping your cards close. Good," he said.

"You said it yourself, back at father's party: always be on my guard," said Alexia.

"Speaking of which, I'm sorry to hear about Alexander's suicide," said Wesker, and it sounded as if he'd meant that. "He was a good man. But we all saw it coming. He was obsessed with his family heritage, and when he failed to fill his father's shoes, the man lost touch."

Alexia's expression was unreadable. "I won't make the same mistakes," she said.

"No. I don't think you will," Wesker agreed, and pushed his hands inside his pockets. He looked back at Alfred, who was idly leafing through an issue of National Geographic. "You'll do more for the Ashfords, I think, than your brother ever could," he added. "This

family curse Alexander often spoke about is on the cusp of being lifted."

"I know," said Alexia. "Alfred unfortunately lacks good leadership skills. Though he's good at following orders."

Wesker nodded, seemingly satisfied, and patted Alexia on the head. "Keep up the good work, Alexia. I'll see you at the convention center." Then he stepped into the elevator, and was gone.

"I think Wesker likes you," said Grayson. "You know, in that big brother kind of way."

Alexia shook her head. "No," she said. "He simply knows I'm going to be important one day."

Grayson understood. "He's staying friendly."

The convention was the next day, and was held in another hotel in Akasaka, which doubled as a convention center. Grayson browsed the public showcases: little medical devices that looked as if they belonged in medieval torture pictures; names of chemicals he couldn't pronounce; burgeoning medical prostheses, like the stuff in sci-fi movies. A woman representing some small medical company in Italy tried to give him a demonstration of some weird scanner thing, like the thing Bingham had used, but Grayson didn't understand a word of it, and only knew it had something to do with diabetes.

There were press crews all over the place, snapping pictures, rolling cameras. On a television, Grayson saw the headline ANN REPORTER ANNA WILKES STILL MISSING, but moved quickly, worried someone, however improbable it might be, would recognize him from Rockfort and shuttle him off to Guantanamo.

He watched another small medical company—"this one was out of Chicago, and was called HaloTech"—demonstrating some sort of medical robot that looked like an articulated hand, and another that looked like a weird body-cage prototype, but seemed way too clunky to be functional. The rep, sporting a lab coat and wire-frame glasses, explained that it was their hope to install the hand-model in surgery rooms across the globe by 1994, and that their body-cage thing would one day help the paralyzed walk again.

Grayson walked on and bought a soda from one of the vending machines, watching the Akasaka street beyond the large panoramic glass windows of the show-hall: crowds of people moved hurriedly in the watercolor neon and November rain, surging through Akasaka like a tidal swell of flesh.

"Japan's busy, isn't it?" Grayson almost jumped. Alfred appeared beside him, and, for once in his life, didn't seem to entirely hate him.

"Look, Alfred. Can we not make a scene in the middle of the exhibition?" said Grayson, defensively.

Alfred stared at him, his eyes as pale and blue as his sister's. "Actually, I owe you an apology for what happened on Rockfort," he said. Grayson was floored, but did his best to hide it. "I know what you're thinking: what is Alfred up to?" Alfred grinned, showing white

teeth. "Absolutely nothing, Grayson. I spoke with my sister last night, and she told me some things."

Grayson blushed, knowing where this was going.

Alfred stopped and sucker-punched him, hard, in the nose. "That's for putting your filthy mouth on my sister's," he said. Then took a deep breath and extended his hand to Grayson. "Get up. People are looking."

Grayson was more confused than he was in pain. "Okay, so maybe I deserved that," he conceded, taking Alfred's hand and getting up. His nose was bleeding. Alfred handed him a handkerchief, the one Alexia had bought him for their tenth birthday. "Thanks," he said, and wiped at his nose. "But to be fair, she kissed me first."

"I'm not going to punch my dear sister," he said.

"So why the change of heart, Alfred?"

Alfred didn't immediately answer him. He stopped, glancing over a glass case of medical devices displayed on a slab of white ultrasuede. Then, finally, "My sister, for whatever reason, likes you." He looked at Grayson. "And in the end, I want my dear sister to have everything she wants. Even if one of those things is a scruffy low-born yank."

"To be fair, you guys aren't technically nobility," Grayson pointed out. "I mean, yeah, baronets are kinda considered aristocracy in England. But as I understand it, it's more in the I-feel-bad-for-them-let's-make-them-feel-special kinda way because they paid into King James I's Irish bullshit. You're not even peerage, right?"

Alfred opened his mouth to speak, closed it, then nodded.

"Not to downplay the Ashfords," said Grayson, and meant it. "It's more than I can say about my family."

"Indeed it is," said Alfred haughtily. He was quiet. Then, "You don't talk much about your family. Neither does Scott."

"Mom died when I was a baby. I don't remember her. I have an aunt in Atlantic City—the one who'd had that blood clot—and a few cousins in New York and Hoboken, on my dad's side." Grayson shrugged. "I never met any of my grandparents," he added.

"Why not?" said Alfred. "Met your grandparents, I mean."

"Dad said grandpa died, and so did grandma. He kinda gets evasive when I ask. My mom's folks don't like my dad because he'd knocked my mom up with me before they'd married, so they don't talk to us."

Alfred nodded. "What of your cousins?"

"I talk to them on the phone sometimes," said Grayson. "One of them, his name's Nathan Callahan—he's my aunt's kid, the one with the blood clot—though we call him Nat, and his friends call him Natty Cal. He's seventeen, just two years older than me. The rest are

adults, either married or on their own."

"You sound like your family stays rather close, despite distances," said Alfred.

"I guess my dad's just trying to hold on, you know?" said Grayson. "We don't have family on Rockfort. So my dad keeps in touch with the family we do have, back Stateside."

"Callahan is an Irish name. Is that where your family's from, Grayson?"

Grayson laughed. "My aunt married some Irish guy from Cork. But yeah, mostly. And we got some German, and I think a little Italian somewhere. Oh, and English. Gotta great-aunt who lives in Dover, though I've never met her."

"I've been to Dover. It's a lovely place," said Alfred, and nodded.

As they talked, Grayson was surprised to find that, under the bratty veneer, Alfred actually wasn't so bad. They weren't exactly friends now, but weren't precisely enemies either, and Grayson was okay with that. It was an indefinite ceasefire, Grayson thought, like in the Korean War: an indefinite ceasefire, which was just effective enough to cast the illusion of peace while the war quietly continued, always one trigger-pull away from bloodshed.

The third and final day of the convention quickly came. This was the day all the companies would get together and answer a Q&A panel on their public projects. He saw the researcher from HaloTech up there, discussing his hand-model thing, answering questions from the press. Camera-flashes popped around Grayson. Reporters shouted questions, competing with one another to be the first to get an answer. Slowly, the panel cycled researchers, and then it was Umbrella's turn to speak, which, it appeared to Grayson, was what the press had been waiting for. They went into a piranha-like frenzy, shouting questions and pushing at each other. Birkin and Wesker stood up there on the platform. Wesker wore a lab coat over a black suit, and Birkin wore his lab coat too, and a dress shirt and tie underneath.

The press asked Birkin and Wesker what they were currently working on. Grayson heard something about a cure for Duchenne muscular dystrophy, but it sounded like bullshit to him. They went into long-winded explanations of their virological work, though Grayson hadn't really paid attention. Once their demonstration was over, Alexia took the panel, and people in the room actually cheered. Wesker stooped and whispered something to her, then went away with Birkin.

Alfred was standing beside Grayson. "She doesn't look happy," he remarked. "I didn't even know she had something to publicly showcase."

If Grayson hadn't known Alexia as well as he did, he would have mistaken her bullshit smile for a real one. "She doesn't," he said. "Board probably coerced her into it. She's pretty much a celebrity right now, and Umbrella's capitalizing on it."

Alfred nodded. "The world is enraptured by the idea of a little girl

who's smarter than all of them," he said. "It's media masochism."

"People have always been obsessed with people who are better off than them," Grayson pointed out. "We live in a world where people worship at television altars, Alfred, and sacrifice their time and envy to the Hollywood gods."

The press, like it had with Birkin and Wesker, lobbed questions at her about her work, and if she had anything to showcase, to which Alexia replied yes, but she couldn't talk about it yet, but would be happy to answer other questions. It went as Q&A panels usually did, though unlike Birkin and Wesker, the media had started asking Alexia more personal questions about her family: one rep even asked, as insensitively as possible, why her father had committed suicide, and if it was true her grandfather had died in some freak lab accident while handling illegal bio-materials. Another rep, this one announced they were from ANN, asked Alexia about the disappearance of Anna Wilkes, and Alexia said she didn't know anything about the disappearance, but was profoundly sorry it had happened.

The press got more vicious, the deeper into the Q&A they got. Things moved from questions about Umbrella to question about the Ashfords. One reporter asked where Alexia's mother was, or if she still had any family left besides her brother. Another reporter, from a small paper based out of Seattle, asked, very loudly, about Rockfort, but was quickly escorted out by Umbrella personnel in black suits.

Grayson could see Alexia was beginning to buckle; she wasn't used to this kind of aggressive attention, none of the Ashfords were. He wanted to go up there and get her out, but she hung on until the end, too stubborn to quit. When it had finally ended, Alexia stepped off the stage and went away from the convention, looking sick. A few reporters tried to follow her out, but Grayson's father pushed them back, which wasn't very hard since he was such a big, built guy, and a former marine.

Outside, there were more reporters. They shoved microphones in Alexia's face and asked several more deeply personal questions. His father shoved them away. Alexia, obviously unable to take it anymore, bolted down Akasaka toward Roppongi.

"Alexia!" Grayson shouted, and ran after her, shouldering through Japanese locals, and the occasional foreign tourist.

Eventually, he found her sitting on a bench, under the sad blue glow of neon kanji. Dusk was settling over Tokyo, and the rain had slowed to a steady fall. Alexia wasn't crying, though looked as if she really wanted to, but had forgotten how.

Grayson sat down beside her, hands deep in the pockets of his denim jacket. He watched the nightlife crowds drifting past like haute couture ghosts, not paying any mind to them. "You know," said Grayson, conversationally. "You really shouldn't be wandering around Roppongi by yourself." He looked at her. "I hear this place is pretty bad news. Lots of human trafficking. Say the Yakuza are the ones who go hunting up and down here, looking for pretty girls like you to work their brothels. Hear they really like young blond, blue-eyed European chicks. Can sell them for a nice sum on the whole 'rare and exotic' ticket to their sleazy clientele."

Alexia didn't say anything immediately, and stared at him. Then she said, "I suppose I should be lucky that you follow me everywhere, yes?" She wore a gray windbreaker over a gray cardigan, and clutched a plastic water bottle labeled with streamlined ideograms.

"Alfred can't run as fast as me, and dad was busy keeping the press away," said Grayson, taking her bottle, unscrewing the cap, and helping himself to a mouthful of lukewarm water. Alexia made a face at him, but took the bottle back anyway. "And I'm pretty big for a fifteen-year-old," he added. "People don't mess with me."

"They don't, do they," said Alexia, and smiled.

They rode the subway to Shibuya. It was probably the busiest place Grayson had ever seen. Tides of people rushed through the streets, flooding across Shibuya Crossing, down the streets and side-streets in a constant, uninterrupted flow. Neon blared from every inch of the place, electric rainbows advertising everything from beauty products with smiling Japanese nymphets, to cars, to the latest in Western fashion trends.

They browsed several boutiques that sold cheap plastic anime toys, and electronics, both of which interested Grayson more than it did Alexia. One of the shops sold the next generation of gaming consoles: it was called a Famicom, and Grayson really wanted one, and even Alexia seemed interested, but neither of them spoke Japanese, so they left it alone, feeling dejected. They wandered the side-streets and stopped by a tiny record store, which seemed to primarily deal in esoteric Japanese synthpop and smelled, faintly, of cigarettes and old plastic. Grayson didn't want to leave empty-handed, so he bought a Ryuichi Sakamoto album ("It's very good", the teenager behind the check-out assured him. "You will like it") and left.

"I'm not used to all this attention," said Alexia. She was eating some kind of sweet potato snack glazed in syrup and topped with toasted sesame seeds, and swore it was probably the best thing she'd ever had. "It's overwhelming, to be perfectly honest," she continued. "I want to do my research in peace, Grayson. Not with the eyes of world on me."

He slung his bag over his shoulder and shrugged. "Yeah, not gonna happen. You're thirteen-years-old, and a certified genius. People notice that shit, and they cling, because it makes them feel like they're part of something bigger than their 9-5, or their family, or their circles of friends and acquaintances." Grayson looked at her and grinned. "But if it helps? You're just a media fad to sell papers, Alexia, and you too shall pass. Just like Tesla and his weird ideas, just like Shirley Temple, just like The Beatles."

"That's strangely comforting," she admitted, stabbing another syrupy chunk of sweet potato and popping it into her mouth.

"What I'm here for. To make you feel better about yourself." Grayson kissed her cheek, then held her hand, suddenly feeling very brave, or caring so little because they were in Japan. Here, they were just two gaijin tourists who nobody cared about.

Grayson stopped at a payphone in front of a boutique called Pretty Girl and fed his change into the slot, taking the phone off the

cradle. He dialed the number to the Hilton and waited. It rang for a few seconds. Then Alfred picked up. "Grayson, it better be you on the other end. We've been worried sick about my sister."

"Alexia's fine," said Grayson, glancing back at Alexia. "She was feeling pretty down, so I took her out for a bit. We're in Shibuya, and we're okay. I wanted to call so you knew that. How's dad?"

"Scott's furious you ran off like that, but I'll sort him out," said Alfred, and sighed. "Alexia's upset, you said?" Alfred sounded worried.

"Yeah," said Grayson, hugging the plastic phone between his shoulder and chin, running a hand back through his hair. He kept his eyes on Alexia. "I think those reporter assholes shook her up a bit. But she's fine now. I think she's actually having fun."

There was a pause on the line. "Well, good. Keep it up then, Grayson," said Alfred. Another pause. Then, "But if something happens to her, I swear I will kill you." There was something in Alfred's voice that told Grayson he wasn't kidding.

"Okay," said Grayson. "I won't let anything happen, Alfred. I promise."

"Good," said Alfred, sounding satisfied. "I'm going to turn in. You still have your keycard to the room, I trust?"

"Of course I do."

"Good. Be quiet when you come in. You walk with the grace of a bloody three-legged cow, Grayson." Alfred hung up.

"Night, Alfred," he said to nobody, hanging the phone on its cradle. He turned to Alexia. "Got the time, Alexia?"

Alexia checked the antique Rolex on her wrist. "Eight o'clock," she said.

"Cool, we have some time to explore. Buses run until 1 am, I think. We can just take one back."

"Why not the train?"

"Too fucking crowded. I was sardined the entire ride," he said. "I'm a big guy, Alexia," he added defensively. Grayson paused, looking at her. Then, "Hey, when you went up to talk on that panel, you seemed upset. Before those assholes started peppering you with questions, I mean."

Alexia frowned. "The Board essentially said my research with T-Veronica was silly, but in politer terms." She sighed. "Then they had the gall to tell me they wanted me up on that Q&A. I'm really sick of being Umbrella's celebrity pet. I'm a _researcher_, Grayson."

"You too shall pass," he reminded her, and smiled.

She smiled back. "You're much better at cheering me up than my

brother."

Grayson shrugged. "Alfred's socially retarded, and has no tact," he said. "Oh. Also, I saw Wesker say something to you up on the panel. What was it?"

"He said 'good luck'. I think he knew what was coming," said Alexia.

_Beat It _started playing over the speakers in Pretty Girl. Grayson grinned, slid back on his feet (he refused to ever call it a moonwalk, because the guy on Soul Train had called it a backslide, and he'd done it first) and started to lip-sync and dance Jackson's whole routine from the video. Alexia started laughing, said he looked ridiculous, and a few Japanese girls cheered _sugoi! and _gaijin_, and laughed too, clapping their hands. When the song ended, the small crowd that had gathered dispersed, and Grayson went away with Alexia.

They spent the rest of the evening browsing random shops and boutiques, once again looping back to the Famicom and, once again, deciding they didn't need it because they couldn't speak the language ("They'll probably release it in English in a few years," said Alexia. "The Atari was big"). They caught the bus around ten o'clock, and once they were back in Shinjuku, they stopped at a small hole-in-the-wall that sold udon. The food was really good, and Grayson decided that the one thing he'd definitely miss when they left Japan was udon.

When they got inside the hotel room, Alfred was already burritoed in the blankets, and out cold. They'd gotten one of the suites, so there was another bed, a sitting area with a television, and a small kitchen and bathroom. His father lay on the couch in the sitting area, in his cotton pajamas, and was watching a movie in which Vincent Price played a doctor who wanted to destroy something called the Tingle, a parasite which lived on the human spine and fed on human fears.

"Really, Scott?" said Alexia, looking at the television.

Grayson's father grinned. "Vincent Price is a class act, Alexia."

"Vincent Price is certainly something," she said, and headed to the bathroom. "I'm going to get a shower."

When Alexia had gone, his father sat up and said, "Hell of a day, huh?"

Grayson nodded and sat beside him, staring at a half-eaten pint of vanilla ice cream on the coffee table. Water rattled in the background, from the shower. "Yeah. You're not mad?"

"I was furious," said his father, and roughly patted Grayson on the head. "Alfred said you were okay, though. Thought you two could use some fun." He play-punched Grayson in the arm. "Besides, I trust you to keep Alexia safe. I know you got feelings for her, kiddo. Besides, your old man taught you how to fight."

Grayson chuckled. "So you know about us, huh?"

"Yeah, according to Al it's pretty serious," said his father, amused. "He isn't too happy about it, but I think his love for Alexia supersedes his personal feelings. Kid would jump off a bridge if Alexia told him to." He glanced back at the bathroom door. "Just... keep an eye on her, Grayson. Look out for her."

On the television, Vincent Price wrestled with a rubber monster that looked like a cross between a lobster and a leech, while a balding man in pinstripe looked on in horror. "Alexia can take care of herself," said Grayson.

"I know that," said his father. "She's different now because she's away from the lab. But when we get back, she's going to dive headfirst into her research like a kid off their Ritalin. I'm worried she's going to hurt herself, Grayson." He frowned. "She's too young for that brain of her's, kiddo. Alexia's still in that whole 'invincible' stage every kid goes through, where she thinks she's untouchable because she's young and full of too many raging goddamn hormones."

"I can try," said Grayson, and nodded, staring down at his hands.

"That's all you can do, son," said his father, and clapped him on the back. "You and Alexia, there's something there. And that girl's become like a daughter to me, and Al like the other son I never had, despite the fact he's a little weirdo" and I mean that in the best sort of way. I don't want to see the family fall apart."

"I'll do what I can, dad. Promise."

"Good boy."

Once Alexia had finished her shower, Grayson took one, then changed into a pair of sweatpants, and a T-shirt. Everyone was asleep now. His father had fallen asleep on the couch, curled up under a spare blanket with a bunch of pillows under his head while the television looped infomercials for kitchen devices nobody would ever buy. Grayson turned it off, then headed to his bed. Alexia shared the other bed with Alfred, though Alfred had stolen most of the covers from her, and they both seemed to be fast asleep. He threw himself onto his bed and buried his face in the pillow. Then felt someone's weight climbing onto the bed beside him.

"Are you still up?" he heard Alexia say.

"If your brother or my dad finds you on the bed, they're going to murder _me_."

"I'm not doing anything untoward, and neither will you, right?" said Alexia, and she settled down beside him, curling against his back. She hugged him. "Besides, I'll tell them it was me. You're a better bed-mate than Alfred. He steals all of the covers, and it's_ freezing_ in this room."

Grayson didn't hate the idea of Alexia sleeping beside him. They'd had sleepovers often enough as small kids, but that had been before the hormones, and before either of them even knew what hormones were. Still, he had enough self-control to keep his hands to himself, and

knew Alexia had already made up her mind. And once Alexia made up her mind, she didn't change it. Grayson sighed, throwing her half of his blanket. "Here, dork," he said.

"Thank you," she said, and crawled under it.

"Hey, Alexia?"

"Yes, Grayson?"

He watched the Shinjuku lights beyond the window, the rain making neon streaks on the glass. "You're gonna be careful, right?" he said, without thinking. "When we get back to the Antarctic. No unnecessary risks?"

Alexia was quiet for what had felt like an eternity. Then she said, "My work is dangerous. I can't make any promises, Grayson."

It was almost as if she was hinting at something, and that made him nervous, and a little angry. Grayson rolled, looking her in the face. "You know," he said. "I always hated foreshadowing. It pretty much gives the end of a story away, so you go the rest of the book with this preconceived idea in your head of what's coming. So shut up with that noise, Alexia. The book hasn't ended yet, and authors change their minds all the time. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle? He wanted to kill Sherlock off, but his fans convinced him not to."

Alexia half-smiled, then kissed him. "You're adorable when you're angry," she commented. "Like a nippy puppy."

"Alexia, I'm trying to be serious here," he said, and frowned. "Don't do anything stupid when we get back, okay?"

Alfred stirred on the other bed, sleepily muttered shut up, and blindly lobbed a pillow in their direction; though it never quite reached them, and landed on the floor instead.

"Okay, Grayson," whispered Alexia. "I won't." Then she rolled over and fell asleep.

In the morning, Grayson had spent twenty minutes trying to convince his father and Alfred that nothing had happened, and that Alexia had gotten into the bed herself, which she'd replied yes, she had, and had assured them that goodness, she was only thirteen, and that her virginity was still very much intact, thank you. Her frankness had settled down both Alfred and his father, who hadn't seemed to want to pursue the topic of Alexia's virginity, and they'd gone away to pack their things for Narita.

Grayson headed to the lobby to grab some breakfast at the buffet, courtesy of the hotel. Alexia had come with him. The other researchers were gathered there, helping themselves to bagels, eggs, sausage, miso soup, steamed rice, tamagoyaki, broiled fish, and several other things—most of which Grayson didn't recognize. He grabbed a plate, then one for Alexia, and started down the line, piling whatever looked good onto his plate.

Birkin was there, pouring himself a coffee. Wesker was at the table with him, tucking into some eggs, and toast with marmalade. "Care to sit with us?" asked Wesker, and grinned, gesturing at the empty

seats.

Alexia looked as if she was about to say no, they wouldn't, but Grayson sat down anyway because the tables were mostly taken, and he didn't want to stand up and eat. "Thanks, Wesker," he said, helping himself to some coffee before digging into his breakfast.

"Wesker, do you seriously have to invite Ashford here?" asked Birkin.

"Why not, William?"

"Because I don't want to stare at her stupid face while I'm eating."

"Deal with it, William. Marcus said to play nice, remember?"

Birkin opened his mouth, shut it, then stabbed at a slab of ham on his plate.

Alexia looked smugly triumphant. She'd gotten herself a tea, tearing open a sugar packet and dumping the contents into her tea. Then she added another, then another... Grayson made a face. "You put way too much sugar in your tea, Alexia."

"You don't hear me criticizing the fact you drink your coffee black. That's rightly disgusting, Grayson. Criminal."

"I'll be laughing when your teeth are getting drilled for cavities," he said.

"I'm sorry that nasty business with the press had happened, Alexia," said Wesker, and sipped his coffee. "Animals, the lot of them."

"I don't know, I thought it was funny," said Birkin. "Especially when Ashford ran."

Grayson looked at Birkin. "Shut up, or I'm gonna punch you, man."

Alexia shrugged, forking a piece of poached egg into her mouth. She chewed, swallowed, then said, "It's fine. It all worked out." Daintily, she wiped at her mouth with a napkin, then sipped her tea. "They seem to have all gone."

"Once the convention was over, the press pretty much deserted Tokyo," said Wesker. "I'm surprised they weren't more persistent in tracking you down, however. Though I imagine that big butler of yours scared a good few of them away."

"Scott?" said Alexia, and nodded. She smiled, cutting another piece of poached egg with her fork and eating. "He's been a family fixture since my grandfather. He's a good man. Ex-marine, if I recall, and fought in the Pacific Theater. Alfred loves his war stories."

"Guy definitely looks like a meathead," chirped Birkin, blowing on his coffee and sipping. He looked at Grayson with eyes the color of dull steel. "You look like him. He's your dad, right?"

"Yep," said Grayson. "And call him a meathead again, I'll show you

something he taught me."

Birkin didn't seem to want to push his luck too hard. There were dark crescents under his eyes. Then he said, "The Ashfords just let you hang around? I mean, I get your dad. He's the butler, right. But what are you to them, kid?"

"Grayson," said Alexia, with all the gravity of a philosopher who was about to reveal something profoundly mind-blowing, "is my boyfriend. He's also my personal servant."

Birkin started laughing, and Wesker looked as if he was struggling not to. "Your boyfriend?" said Wesker, grinning. "Oh, that's absolutely precious."

Grayson suddenly wanted to become something very small and inconspicuous, like a penny on the floor, or an ant, or a piece of pocket lint.

"You're thirteen, Ashford," said Birkin, still laughing. "You don't know the first thing about relationships."

Wesker cut in. "Oh, but you do? I hear Annette still hasn't answered that little note you'd left on her desk."

"Who's side are you fucking on, Wesker? Seriously," said Birkin, turning red.

"I'm on nobody's side but my own, and this delicious cup of coffee's," Wesker mused.

Alexia leveled a look at Birkin. "My age has nothing to do with anything. Just a hundred years ago, people married at fourteen. But that's beside the point." She tapped her head. "Mentally, I'm light-years beyond you, Birkin. Mentally, I'm bloody seventy, and you're twelve."

"Oh, so you're senile, slowly trending toward Alzheimer's. Got it," said Birkin, and nodded.

"Now, now. No need to get hostile, William," said Wesker. Then, to Alexia, "I think it's wonderful you've found a boyfriend, Alexia. Best of luck to you both." He paused, checked his wristwatch. "Ah, our flight will be landing soon. Come along, William. You know Dr. Marcus doesn't want to be kept waiting."

"Hey, Birkin," said Grayson, and when Birkin looked, he punched him squarely in the face. Birkin went down, and probably would have hit him back, but Wesker was dragging him away. "That's for being an asshole!" he called after him. "Have a safe flight!" He watched them gather their bags and go. Birkin was cursing the entire way out.

Alexia was laughing. "Serves him right," she said.

7. Part Three - End

They flew back to Antarctica, with a diversion to one of Umbrella's island outposts just off the coast of Australia for refueling. When

they landed at the Antarctic base, Grayson and his father gathered the Ashford's bags, while a team of researchers bombarded Alexia with print-outs, questions, and convoluted explanations of the progress of various projects. Back at the mansion, Grayson put away the Ashford's things in their rooms, then packed his stuff back into his drawers and closet. His father went to cook dinner, so Grayson put on the Ryuichi Sakamoto album he'd bought, found he liked the synth-weirdness of it, and lay on his bed, reading a battered paperback of Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature, which Alexia had given him.

Days passed slowly, and Grayson hadn't seen Alexia at all. He'd tried to coax her out of her lab with her favorite dinners, and had even pretended to fight Alfred ("Just punch me right in the face, Grayson. Make it look good," Alfred had said. "Maybe she'll come out then") right outside her office door; but if Alexia had ever heard them, she'd never said so. His father had said in Tokyo: She's going to dive headfirst into her research like a kid off their Ritalin. And the Ritalin part made him laugh, but there was also a resounding truth in that statement: Alexia was obsessed with her work.

Thanksgiving had passed, and Alexia had only shown up for five minutes to have a bite of turkey before she'd gone back to her lab again; she'd looked so tired and sick. With her gone so much, Grayson had started hanging out with Alfred more, who still didn't exactly like him, but didn't exactly hate him either (and on rare occasions, seemed to even like him). Grayson figured it was because they'd both found a sort of commonality in their loneliness without her.

December came quickly, as the Christmas season tended to.

They were in the sun-room, playing a strategic war-game on Alfred's battlefield set. It was a long table, sort of like a billiard table, with white grid-lines stenciled on the green baize. The players stood on the ends and took turns moving miniature battalions along the grid-boxes, like the pieces in chess. Terrain could be adjusted: Alfred had a box full of plastic hills, cliffs, and rubber lakes and ponds. Structures, like camps and forts, could also be added to the war-map for more elaborate campaigns. A pair of blue dice decided weather conditions, and a pair of white prism-shaped dice decided how much damage the player's pieces did to their opponent's using a hit-point system, which could fluctuate or dwindle depending on the size of the player's army, or how good or bad their defenses were. Alfred had created the game himself, and though it still had kinks, Grayson found it pretty fun.

Grayson moved his infantryman forward, then rolled the white dice. Alfred had rolled the blue dice earlier, so it was raining in their campaign, which issued a movement penalty to both their sides. "You should sell this game to a toy company," said Grayson. The dice showed twelve. That was enough to wipe out one of Alfred's wounded foot-soldiers.

Alfred took the foot-soldier off the map and set it aside. "Alexia said the same thing. But it's still very much a work-in-progress," he said, and moved one of his grenadiers. Alfred rolled the dice: twenty. Grayson's infantrymen was wiped out, and his foot-soldier adjacent to it took a bit of shrapnel. "Alexia never really liked

playing, however. I always beat her. My dear sister is intelligent, but not much of a military tactician."

"Neither am I," Grayson admitted, moving one of his captains out of harm's way. "To be honest, I don't really know what I'm doing. But it's fun."

"I don't expect you to know, Grayson. You're a servant."

"And you won't find a guy who can make marble shine better than I can," said Grayson, and laughed.

"Well, there's something to be said about a man who takes pride in his work," said Alfred, and smiled.

Three hours later, the game was over, and as Grayson had expected, Alfred won. In fact, Alfred had decimated his entire army, one brilliant move after another, and it had surprised Grayson because he'd never known Alfred was that tactically smart, or versed so well in military conventions. They walked side by side, down the hallway. "Christmas is gonna be here in a few weeks," said Grayson. "Get anything for Alexia?"

"What do you get a girl who has everything?" asked Alfred, as if the question was profoundly philosophical.

"Socks?"

"Be serious, Grayson," said Alfred.

"Okay. Maybe..." Grayson trailed off, thinking. Then he said, "Hey, what about some nice barrettes, or something? Her hair's getting kinda long."

"I did see these lovely silver ones in Ginza," said Alfred, rubbing his chin. "They were shaped like dragonflies."

"Boom. That has Alexia written all over it, man," said Grayson, grinning.

"What about your gift, Grayson?" asked Alfred. "What did you get her? Or plan to get her."

"I actually got it in my room," he said. "Come on, I'll show you."

In his room, Grayson opened the drawer to his writing desk. He took out the black jewelry case he'd bought in Shibuya, from a jewelry shop he and Alexia had stopped in because she'd wanted to look at pins. "Well, what is it?" said Alfred impatiently.

Grayson opened it. Inside was the black vachetta leather choker he'd picked from the display case, and the sterling silver jewel-mount he'd bought custom for it. "Bought it for her family jewel," he explained. "Saw she's always wearing it on her collar, and thought this was more her style. Spent every dime I had on it."

"This must have cost quite a bit," said Alfred, taking it out of the case and studying it. "I think Alexia will like it."

"It did, but it was worth it. Look, it's adjustable, too," said Grayson, pointing at the silver clasps on the back. "So when she's older, she won't have to buy a bigger size."

Alfred put the choker back inside the box. Grayson stowed it back inside his desk. "I fear you might one-up me," said Alfred, and chuckled.

"Nah," said Grayson, and shook his head. But he was pretty sure he had.

Christmas unfolded in a kaleidoscope of colors. The researchers had strung up lights, and set up little Christmas trees in the halls, and a big one in the rec-lounge, where the staff had piled their gifts for each other. Someone must have talked Alexia into letting them play music over the intercom, or maybe they'd just played it anyway, because wherever he went, Grayson heard Frank Sinatra singing The Little Drummer Boy, or Bing Crosby crooning White Christmas, or Dean Martin wanting it so snow.

"There's enough fucking snow here," said Grayson aloud.

Alexia had finally emerged from her laboratory and had gone to the mansion to celebrate the holiday. His father took Christmas seriously, and had insisted, very strongly, that she bring her ass up to the mansion, or he'd come down there and drag her out by the ear, and make a show of it in front of the staff.

Back at the mansion, Alfred had just given Alexia the dragonfly barrettes he'd ordered from Ginza, and she seemed to like them. Alfred gave Grayson a look, patted his shoulder, and left the foyer. Grayson was a bit nervous, and he didn't know why; he took the case from his pocket and awkwardly prodded the back of Alexia's shoulder with it.

Alexia turned around and looked at the box, taking it. "Oh, you got something for me, Grayson?" She seemed surprised. She also looked as if she hadn't slept in weeks. He noticed a few cuts on her knuckles, too.

"Yeah. Got it back in Shibuya, while you were busy looking at pins," he said. "Your hands. You okay?"

"Just cut them while I was working. It was an accident," she said. Alexia opened the box. "Oh," she said, taking the choker out. "It's beautiful, Grayson."

"It's for your jewel," he said, pointing at the ruby fixed to her collar.

Alexia kissed him. She unfastened the ruby and set it on the mount, using her thumbs to push it into place. It clicked. "It fits perfectly," she said, and unbuttoned the first two buttons of her collar, putting the choker on. Grayson helped her with the clasps. Alexia smiled, admiring herself in a beveled mirror framed in scrolled French gold-leaf. "I love it," she added. "But how did you afford it?" She looked at him. "Don't tell me you were saving up."

Grayson grinned and rocked back on the heels of his canvas sneakers.

"I put aside a couple of bucks every paycheck," he said, a bit proud of himself. "I wanted to buy you something nice for Christmas."

As it turned out, Alexia had gotten something for him, too; she'd bought him a custom leather jacket like Jackson had worn in his new Thriller video. He loved it, thanked her profusely, and hugged Alexia for the trouble. Then filed out of the mansion after the twins, so his father could take their picture out front.

"Alexia, scoot a little closer to Grayson, please," said his father, from behind the Polaroid. "You're not in the picture all the way."

Alexia moved. "Good?" she said.

His father nodded. "Yup. Say cheese," and, without waiting, he snapped the picture.

The day after Christmas, Alexia showed up in Grayson's room. He'd been in the middle of finishing A Treatise of Human Nature when she'd plucked the book from his hands, laid it aside, and said, "Pay attention for a moment, please." Grayson paid attention. "I'm going away for fifteen years, Grayson," she said. "I'm sorry."

He wasn't sure if he'd heard her right. "Fifteen years?" he said.

Alexia nodded. "My research," she said, without elaboration. "It's necessary. I'm so sorry, Grayson."

It was as if his world had, in just a span of seconds, crumbled away around him. There was darkness in Alexia's eyes, the sort of war-darkness he'd seen in his father's eyes from the young Japanese blood on his hands. "Alexia," he said, and got up. He saw the cuts and bruises on her hands. "You're not well. Knock this shit off. It's not important."

Alexia shook her head, kissed him, and started backing up toward the door. "I have to go, Grayson." She fumbled for the knob, opened it. Grayson pushed the door shut, so she couldn't leave the room.

"No," he said. "I promised dad I'd stop you from doing this." Hot tears blurred his vision. Grayson wiped them away on his sleeve, feeling as if he had to save face. Then, "I don't want you to go. What about us?"

"I'm sorry, Grayson." Alexia was quiet. She reached up, her cool fingers stroking his cheek. "I'll be back in fifteen years." Another pause, as if she was searching for words. Then she said, softly, "I don't expect you to wait for me. You'll be twenty-nine then, maybe even married. So... don't feel as if you have to wait."

He remembered something Hume had written: The beauty of one person never inspires us with love for another. "I'll wait," said Grayson, and smiled. "Or I'll try to."

Alexia nodded again, sad-smiled, and reached for the doorknob. Grayson moved and watched her go, wondering why he hadn't tried harder to stop her.

* * *

><p>Grayson watched Alexia emerge from the tube, head lit from behind in a fluorescent halo. The wires came away from her pale naked body, and she stumbled out, vomiting bile near Alfred's corpse. Grayson caught her, barely aware of the tears streaking his cheeks. "I'm sorry," was all he'd said, and he came undone. "I'm sorry about Alfred."<p>

She looked at her brother and said nothing. Grayson hugged her, and she soaked his clothes. Fifteen years she'd been gone, and now she was back, a twenty-seven-year-old woman who'd missed nearly two decades of her life. Seeing her like this, Grayson had no words, just apologies for letting Alfred die, for not having tried harder to keep her from hurting herself.

On the monitor nearby, a snow-truck kicked up clouds of snow, which shimmered diamonds in the Arctic sun. Alexia was intently watching the feed.

Grayson remembered something else then, which Hume had written: _Love is always followed by a desire of the happiness of the person beloved... As hatred produces a desire of the misery and an aversion to the happiness of the person hated._

"They killed him," he said. "Claire Redfield and Steve Burnside murdered Alfred."

End
file.